

SUCKERS



JA Konrath
Jeff Strand

SUCKERS

by J.A. Konrath
& Jeff Strand

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“Suckers” © 2008, originally appeared as Delirium hardcover chapbook #6
“The Necro File” © 2008, originally appeared in Like A Chinese Tattoo
“Whelp Wanted” © 2004, originally appeared in Futures Mysterious Anthology Magazine, winter
“Taken To The Cleaners” © 2005, originally appeared in The Strand Magazine #16
“Poor Career Choice” © 2006, originally appeared in These Guns For Hire

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CONTENTS

Introduction by Joe Konrath

Introduction by Jeff Strand

Whelp Wanted - Konrath

Poor Career Choice - Strand

Taken to the Cleaners - Konrath

A Bit of Halloween Mayhem - Strand

The Necro File - Konrath

The Lost (For a Good Reason) Adventure of Andrew Mayhem - Strand

Suckers – Konrath & Strand

Strand Interviews Konrath

INTRODUCTION

by Joe Konrath

My name is Joe Konrath, and I write a mystery/thriller series about Chicago cop Jacqueline “Jack” Daniels. Jack, and her supporting cast of characters, have appeared in six novels since 2004.

One member of that supporting cast is Jack’s ex-partner, a private detective named Harry McGlade.

Even though he’s guest-starred in all of her books, Jack doesn’t like Harry. He’s an insensitive jerk, a disgusting pig, and a self-centered egomaniac who thinks he’s funny.

Which is why Harry is my all time favorite character to write for.

Unfortunately (or fortunately, depending on your taste) I never get into Harry’s head in the Jack Daniels novels. He’s such a goofball that he strains credulity. If I really let Harry be Harry, the books would be disasters.

Which brings us to these short stories.

In these, I let Harry do whatever the hell he wants to. It’s liberating for me as a writer, and hopefully fun for the reader, as no other stories I’ve ever done have packed so many jokes onto the page.

A word of warning. These stories are not politically correct. They’re silly, sometimes offensive, often gory, and mostly just plain wrong. This is Harry Gone Wild, 100% Uncensored.

“Whelp Wanted” is the first Harry short I published, written for the now defunct *Futures Anthology* magazine. It’s quintessential Harry McGlade, taking an absurd premise to the nth degree.

“Taken to the Cleaners” was published in *The Strand* magazine. It’s a comedic mystery, with a ridiculous mystery at the core that just keeps getting stupider.

“The Necro File” is an anti-story. I took everything I’ve learned about story structure, plot, and characterization, and purposely ignored it. As such, it’s one of my favorite things I’ve ever written. This originally appeared in the horror anthology *Like A Chinese Tattoo*, and it certainly qualifies as a horror story. Or maybe “horrible” is a better word. So is “offensive.” In fact, you probably shouldn’t read it at all.

Suckers is a novella I co-wrote with Jeff Strand, originally published in a high-priced, limited hardcover edition by Delirium Books. There may still be copies available. You should buy one.

I first heard about Strand years ago, when I was attending horror conventions as a newbie author. Supposedly there was this guy who also combined scary and funny in his books. I picked up one of his Andrew Mayhem novels, loved it, and began pestering him on a regular basis to write a story with me.

Suckers is a comedic horror tale that finds Harry joining forces with a very reluctant Mayhem. It was a joy to write, because Jeff and I kept trying to make each other crack up. Don't look for logic here. But don't drink anything while you're reading, because it will come out your nose.

If there's irony to be had, it's that after years of being funny, Strand and I recently wrote some very unfunny horror novels.

Under the name Jack Kilborn, I wrote a book called *Afraid*. It contains zero humor. Its goal is to scare the hell out of you.

Strand, using his own name, wrote *Pressure*, which may be the most terrifying novel I've ever read. It's a brutal, full-throttle assault on your psyche.

You know how it's been said that comedians have the biggest inner demons? These two books prove that comedy writers have some pretty big demons of their own.

As for Harry McGlade...

Jack Daniels, and Harry, are currently on a brief hiatus, as I'm currently writing another Kilborn book. But there is a brand new Harry short story that appears in *Uncage Me*, an anthology edited by Jen Jordan. I doubt that will be the last of him. Like Jack says, "Harry keeps returning, like an antibiotic resistant rash."

I hope you enjoy the rash as much as I do.

INTRODUCTION

by Jeff Strand

My name is Jeff Strand, and I write a comedy/thriller/horror series about Andrew Mayhem, a married father of two who always means well but doesn't necessarily make the finest decisions 100% of the time. He's been in three novels. People keep saying "When the hell are you going to write the fourth novel, you slacker?" and I keep taunting them with promises of *Lost Homicidal Maniac (Answers to "Shirley")* but I have yet to deliver. It's going to be cool, though. Andrew Mayhem loses another body part.

The Mayhem novels are legitimate blends of the humorous and the horrific—I try to make them as laugh-out-loud funny as possible while still maintaining a genuine sense of danger. The short stories, on the other hand, are much lighter and fluffier. Oh, sure, there's still cannibalism and stuff, but they mostly just exist to put a goofy smile on your face.

"A Bit of Halloween Mayhem" was posted online (at the stroke of midnight!) as a promotion for the second novel, *Single White Psychopath Seeks Same*. "The Lost (For A Good Reason) Adventure of Andrew Mayhem" was published as a limited edition chapbook that was included with early orders for *Casket For Sale (Only Used Once)*. Those babies are rare. In fact, the chapbook says how many copies are in existence, but that's a vicious lie—the actual amount is maybe a third of that. I hope you didn't lose your copy.

"Poor Career Choice" was written for *These Guns For Hire*, an anthology edited by that Joe Konrath guy. He promised that it would make me fabulously wealthy and gain me millions of new fans. I kind of figured that he was exaggerating, but nope, I'm typing this on a laptop made from unicorn horns, and those things are pricey. Thanks, Joe!

I would like to state for the record that I cannot freakin' believe that Joe is including "The Necro File" in this collection. It's one of the funniest stories I've ever read, but it makes *Suckers* look classy. And *Suckers*, as you'll soon discover, is not classy.

That said, *Suckers* was a lot of fun to write. It was mostly an "I'll write the Andrew Mayhem chapters; you write the Harry McGlade chapters" arrangement, but there was some definite

spillover, and there are some parts in this story where I honestly can't remember who wrote what. (And other parts where I remember *exactly* who wrote what, such as a scene involving Harry McGlade's sexual prowess. That's all Joe. When you get to that part, please whisper "Author J.A. Konrath wrote this, while author Jeff Strand stood back and shook his head sadly" to yourself, okay?)

Enjoy the mayhem, kiddies!

WHELP WANTED

A Harry McGlade Mystery by JA Konrath

I was halfway through a meatball sandwich when a man came into my office and offered me money to steal a dog.

A lot of money.

“Are you an animal lover, Mr. McGlade?”

“Depends on the animal. And call me Harry.”

He offered his hand. I stuck out mine, and watched him frown when he noticed the marinara stains. He abruptly pulled back, reaching instead into the inner pocket of his blazer. The suit he wore was tailored and looked expensive, and his skin was tanned to a shade only money can buy.

“This is Marcus.” His hand extended again, holding a photograph. “He’s a Shar-pei.”

Marcus was one of those unfortunate Chinese wrinkle dogs, the kind that look like a great big raisin with fur. He was light brown, and his face had so many folds of skin that his eyes were completely covered.

I bet the poor pooch walked into a lot of walls.

“Cute,” I said, because the man wanted to hire me.

“Marcus is a champion show dog. He’s won four AKC competitions. Several judges have commented that he’s the finest example of the breed they’ve ever seen.”

I wanted to say something about Marcus needing a good starch and press, but instead inquired about the dog’s worth.

“With the winnings, and stud fees, he’s worth upwards of ten thousand dollars.”

I whistled. The dog was worth more than I was.

“So, what’s the deal, Mr...”

“Thorpe. Vincent Thorpe. I’m willing to double your usual fee if you can get him back.”

I took another bite of meatball, wiped my mouth on my sleeve, and leaned back in my swivel chair. The chair groaned in disapproval.

“Tell me a little about Marcus, Mr. Thorpe. Curly fries?”

“Pardon me?”

I gestured to the bag on my desk. “Did you want any curly fries? Potatoes make me bloaty.”

He shook his head. I snatched a fry, bloating be damned.

“I’ve, um, raised Marcus since he was a pup. He has one of the best pedigrees in the sport. Since Samson passed away, there has quite literally been no competition.”

“Samson?”

“Another Shar-pei. Came from the same littler as Marcus, owned by a man named Glen Ricketts. Magnificent dog. We went neck and neck several times.”

“Hold on, a second. I’d like to take notes.”

I pulled out my notepad and a pencil. On the first piece of paper, I wrote, “*Dog.*”

“Do you know who has Marcus now?”

“Another breeder named Abigail Cummings. She borrowed Marcus to service her Shar-pei, Julia. When I went to pick him up, she insisted she didn’t have him, and claimed she didn’t know what I was talking about.”

I jotted this down. My fingers made a grease spot on the page.

“Did you try the police?”

“Yes. They searched her house, but didn’t find Marcus. She’s insisting I made a mistake.”

“Did Abigail give you money to borrow Marcus? Sign any contracts?”

“No. I lent him to her as a favor. And she kept him.”

“How do you know her?”

“Casually, from the American Kennel Club. Her Shar-pei, Julia, is a truly magnificent bitch. You should see her haunches.”

I let that one go.

“Why did you lend out Marcus if you only knew her casually?”

“She called me a few days ago, promised me the pick of the litter if I lent her Marcus. I never should have done it. I should have just given her a straw.”

“A straw?”

“Of Marcus’s seed. I milk him by...”

I held up my palm and scribbled out the word ‘*straw.*’ Sometimes there was such a thing as too much information. “Let’s move on.”

Thorpe pressed his lips together so tightly they lost color. His eyes got sticky.

“Please, Harry. Marcus is more than just a dog to me. He’s my best friend.”

I didn’t doubt it. You don’t milk a casual acquaintance.

“Maybe you could hire an attorney.”

“That takes too long. If I go through legal channels, it could be months before my case is called. And even then, I’d need some kind of proof that she had him, so I’d have to hire a private investigator anyway.”

I scraped away a coffee stain on my desk with my thumbnail.

“I’m sorry for your loss, Mr. Thorpe. But hiring me to bust into someone’s home and steal a dog... I’m guessing that breaks all sorts of laws. I could have my license revoked, I could go to jail—”

“I’ll triple your fee.”

“I take cash, checks, or major credit cards.”

* * *

Night Vision Goggles use a microprocessor to magnify ambient light and allow a user to see in almost total blackness.

They’re also pricey as hell, so I had to make due with a flashlight and some old binoculars.

It was a little past eleven in the evening, and I was sitting in the bough of a tree, staring into the backyard of Abigail Cummings. I’d been there for almost two hours. The night was typical for July in Chicago; hot, sticky, and humid. The black ski mask I wore was so damp with sweat it threatened to drown me.

Plus, I was bloaty.

I let the binocs hang around my neck and flashed the light at my notepad to review my stake-out report.

9:14 PM—Climbed tree.

9:40 PM—Drank two sodas.

10:15 PM—Foot fell asleep.

Not too exciting so far. I took out my pencil and added, “*11:04 PM—really regret drinking those sodas.*”

To keep my mind off of my bladder, I spent a few minutes trying to balance the pencil on the tip of my finger. It worked, until I dropped the pencil.

I checked my watch. 11:09. I attempted to write “dropped my pencil” on my notepad, but you can guess how that turned out.

I was all set to call it a night, when I saw movement in the backyard.

It was a woman, sixty-something, her short white hair glowing in the porch light.

Next to her, on a leash, was Marcus.

“Is someone in my tree?”

I fought panic, and through Herculean effort managed to keep my pants dry.

“No,” I answered.

She wasn’t fooled.

“I’m calling the police!”

“Wait!” My voice must have sounded desperate, because she paused in her race back to the house.

“I’m from the US Department of Foliage. I was taking samples of your tree. It seems to be infested with the Japanese Saganaki Beetle.”

“Why are you wearing that mask?”

“Uh... so they don’t recognize me. Hold on, I need to ask you a few sapling questions.”

I eased down, careful to avoid straining myself. When I reached ground, the dog trotted over and amiably sniffed at my pants.

“I’m afraid I don’t know much about agriculture.”

From the tree, Ms. Cummings was nothing to look at. Up close, she made me wish I was still in the tree.

The woman was almost as wrinkly as the dog. But unlike her canine companion, she had tried to fill in those wrinkles with make-up. From the amount, she must have used a paint roller. The eye shadow alone was thick enough to stop a bullet. Add to that a voice like raking gravel, and she was quite the catch.

I tried to think of something to ask her, to keep the beetle ploy going. But this was getting too complicated, so I just took out my gun.

“The dog.”

Her mouth dropped open.

“The what?”

“That thing on your leash that’s wagging its tail. Hand it over.”

“Why do you want my dog?”

“Does it matter?”

“Of course it does. I don’t want you to shoot me, but I also don’t want to hand over my dog to a homicidal maniac.”

“I’m not a homicidal maniac.”

“You’re wearing a ski mask in ninety degree weather, hopping from one foot to the other like some kind of monkey.”

“I had too much soda. Give me the damn leash.”

She handed me the damn leash. So far so good.

“Okay. You just stand right here, and count to a thousand before you go back inside, or else I’ll shoot you.”

“Aren’t you leaving?”

“Yeah.”

“Not to second-guess you, Mr. Dognapper, but how can you shoot me, if you’ve already gone?”

Know-it-all.

“I think you need a bit more blush on your cheeks. There are some folks in Wisconsin who can’t see it from there.”

Her lips down turned. With all the lipstick, they looked like two cartoon hot dogs.

“This is *Max Factor*.”

“I won’t tell Max if you don’t. Now start counting.”

I was out of there before she got to ‘6.’

* * *

After I got back to my office, I took care of some personal business, washed my hands, and called the client. He agreed to come right over.

“Mr. McGlade, I can’t tell you how... oh, yuck.”

“Watch where you’re stepping. Marcus decided to mark his territory.”

Thorpe made an unhappy face, then he took off his shoe and left it by the door.

“Mr. McGlade, thank you for... yuck.”

“He’s marked a couple spots. I told you to watch out.”

He removed the other shoe.

“Did you bring the money?”

“I did, and I—wait a second!”

“You might as well just throw away the sock, because those stains...”

“That’s not Marcus!”

I looked at the dog, who was sniffing around my desk, searching for another place to make a deposit.

“Of course it’s your dog. Look at that face. He’s a poster boy for Retin-A.”

“That’s not a *he*. It’s a *she*.”

“Really?” I peeked under the dog’s tail and frowned. “I’ll be damned.”

“You took the wrong dog, Mr. McGlade. This is Abigail’s bitch, Julia.”

“It’s an honest mistake, Mr. Thorpe. Anyone could have made it.”

“No, not anyone, Mr. McGlade. Most semi-literate adults know the difference between boys and girls. Would you like me to draw you a picture?”

“Ease up, Thorpe. When I meet a new dog, I don’t lift up a hind leg and stick my face down there to check out the plumbing.”

“This is just... oh, yuck.”

“The garbage can is over there.”

Thorpe removed his sock, and I wracked my brain to figure out how this could be salvaged.

“Any chance you want to keep this dog instead? You said she was a magnificent broad.”

“*Bitch*, Mr. McGlade. It’s what we call female dogs.”

“I was trying to put a polite spin on it.”

“I want Marcus. That was the deal.”

“Okay, okay, let me think.”

I thought.

Julia had her nose in the garbage can, sniffing Thorpe’s sock. If I could only switch dogs somehow.

That was it.

“I’ll switch dogs somehow,” I said.

“What are you talking about?”

“Like a hostage trade. I’ll call up Ms. Cummings, and trade Julia for Marcus.”

“Do you think it’ll work?”

“Only one way to find out.”

I picked up the phone.

* * *

“Ms. Cummings? I have your dog.”

“I know. I watched you steal him an hour ago.”

For someone who looked like a mime, she was sure full of comments.

“If you’d like your dog back, we can make a deal.”

“Is my little Poopsie okay? Are you taking care of her?”

“She’s fine. I can see why you call her Poopsie.”

“Does Miss Julia still have the trots? Poor thing.”

I stared at the land mines dotting my floor. “Yeah. I’m all broken up about it.”

“Make sure she eats well. Only braised liver and the leanest pork.”

Julia was currently snacking on a tuna sandwich I’d dropped under the desk sometime last week.

“I’ll do that. Look, I want to make a trade.”

I had to play it cool here, if she knew I knew about Marcus, she’d know Thorpe was the one who hired me.

“What kind of trade?”

“I don’t want a female dog. I want a male.”

“Did Vincent Thorpe hire you?”

Dammit.

“Uh, never heard of him.”

“Mr. Thorpe claims I have his dog, Marcus. But the last time I saw Marcus was at an AKC show last April. I have no idea where his dog is.”

“That’s not how he tells it.”

Nice, Harry. I tried to regroup.

“Look, Cummings, you have twelve hours to come up with a male dog. I also want sixty dollars, cash.”

Thorpe nudged me and mouthed, “Sixty dollars?”

I put my hand over the mouthpiece. “Carpet cleaning.”

“I don’t know if I can find a male dog in just 12 hours, Mr. Dognapper.”

“Then I turn Julia into a set of luggage.”

I heard her gasp. “You horrible man!”

“I’ll do it, too. She’s got enough hide on her to make two suitcases and a carry-on. The wrinkled look is hot this year.”

I scratched Julia on the head, and she licked my chin. Her breath made me teary-eyed.

“Please don’t hurt my dog.”

“I’ll call you tomorrow morning with the details. If you contact the police, I’ll mail you Julia’s tail.”

“I... I already called the police. I called them right after you left.”

Hell. “Well, don’t call the police again. I have a friend at the Post Office who gives me a discount rate. I’m there twice a week, mailing doggie parts.”

I hit the disconnect.

“Did it work?” Thorpe asked.

“Like a charm. Go home and get some rest. In about twelve hours, you’ll have your dog back.”

* * *

The trick was finding an exchange location where I wouldn’t be conspicuous in a ski mask. Chicago had several ice rinks, but I didn’t think any of them allowed dogs.

I decided on the alley behind the Congress Hotel, off of Michigan Avenue. I got there two hours early to check the place out.

Time crawled by. I kept track of it in my notepad.

9:02 AM—Arrive at scene. Don’t see any cops. Pull on ski mask and wait.

9:11 AM—It sure is hot.

9:33 AM—Julia finds some rotting fruit behind the dumpster. Eats it.

10:01 AM—Boy, is it hot.

10:20 AM—I think I’m getting a heat rash in this mask. Am I allergic to wool?

10:38 AM—Julia finds a dead rat. Eats it.

10:40 AM—Sure is a hot one.

11:02 AM—Play fetch with the dog, using my pencil.

Julia ate the pencil. I was going to jot this down on the pad, but you can guess how that went.

“Julia!”

The dog jerked on the leash, tugging me to my feet. Abigail Cummings had arrived. She wore a pink linen pants suit, and more make-up than the Rockettes. All of them, combined. I fought the urge to carve my initials in her cheek with my fingernail.

Dog and dog owner had a happy little reunion, hugging and licking, and I was getting ready to sigh in relief when I noticed the pooch Abigail had brought with her.

“I’m no expert, but isn’t that a Collie?”

“A Collie/Shepherd mix. I picked him up at the shelter.”

“That’s not Marcus.”

Abigail frowned at me. “I told you before, Mr. Dognapper. I don’t have Vincent Thorpe’s dog.”

Her bottom lip began to quiver, and her eyes went glassy. I realized, to my befuddlement, that I actually believed her.

“Fine. Give me the mutt.”

Abigail handed me the leash. I stared down at the dog. It was a male, but I doubted I could fool Thorpe into thinking it was Marcus. Even if I shaved off all the fur and shortened the legs with a saw.

“What about my money?” I asked.

She dug into her purse and pulled out a check.

“I can’t take a check.”

“It’s good. I swear.”

“How am I supposed to remain incognito if I deposit a check?”

Abigail did the lip quiver thing again.

“Oh my goodness, I didn’t even think of that. Please don’t make Julia into baggage.”

More tears.

“Calm down. Don’t cry. You’ll ruin your... uh... make-up.”

I offered her a handkerchief. She dabbed at her eyes and handed it back to me.

It looked like it had been tie-dyed.

“I think I have two or three dollars in my purse,” she rasped in her smoker voice. “Is that okay?”

What the hell. I took it.

“I’ll take those Tic-Tacs, too.”

She handed them over. Wint-O-Green.

“Can we go now?”

“Go ahead.”

She turned to leave the alley, and a thought occurred to me.

“Ms. Cummings! When the police came to visit you to look for Marcus, did you have an alibi?”

She glanced over her shoulder and nodded vigorously.

“That’s the point. The day Vincent said he brought the dog to my house, I wasn’t home. I was enjoying the third day of an Alaskan Cruise.”

* * *

Vincent Thorpe was waiting for me when I got back to my office. He carefully scanned the floor before approaching my desk.

“That’s not Marcus! That’s not even a Shar-pei!”

“We’ll discuss that later.”

“Where’s Marcus?”

“There have been some complications.”

“Complications?” Thorpe leaned in closer, raised an eyebrow. “What happened to your face?”

“I think I’m allergic to wool.”

“It looks like you rubbed your cheeks with sandpaper.”

I wrote, “*I hate him*” on my notepad.

“Look, Mr. Thorpe, Abigail Cummings doesn’t have Marcus. But I may have an idea who does.”

“Who?”

“First, I need to ask you a few questions...”

#

My face was too sore for the ski mask again, so I opted for a nylon stocking.

It was hot.

I shifted positions on the branch I was sitting on, and took another look through the binoculars.

Nothing. The backyard was quiet. But thirty feet away, next to a holly bush, was a small, brown anthill, or evidence that there was a dog on the premises.

I took out my pencil and reviewed my stake-out sheet.

9:46 PM—Climbed tree.

9:55 PM—My face hurts.

10:07 PM— It really hurts bad.

10:22 PM—I think I'll go see a doctor.

10:45 PM—Maybe the drug store has some kind of cream.

I added, "*11:07 PM—Spotted evidence in backyard. Remember to pick up some aloe vera on the way home.*"

Before I had a chance to cross my *Ts*, the patio door opened.

I didn't even need the binoculars. A man, mid-forties with short, brown hair, was walking a dog that was obviously a Shar-pei.

Though my track-team days were far behind me (okay, non-existent), I still managed to leap down from the tree without hurting myself.

The man yelped in surprise, but I had my gun out and in his face before he had a chance to move.

"Hi there, Mr. Ricketts. Kneel down."

"Who are you? What do..."

I cocked the gun.

"Kneel!"

He knelt.

"Good. Now lift up that dog's back leg."

"What?"

"Now!"

Glen Ricketts lifted. I checked.

It was Marcus.

"Leash," I ordered.

He handed me the leash. My third dog in two days, but this time it was the right one.

Now for Part Two of the Big Plan.

"Do you know who I am, Glen?"

He shook his head, terrified.

“Special Agent Phillip Pants, of the American Kennel Club. Do you know why I’m here?”

He shook his head again.

“Don’t lie to me, Glen! Does the AKC allow dognapping?”

“No,” he whimpered.

“Your dog show days are over, Ricketts. Consider your membership revoked. If I so much catch you in the petfood aisle at the Piggly Wiggly, I’m going to take you in and have you neutered. Got it?”

He nodded, eager to please. I gave Marcus a pat on the head, and then turned to leave.

“Hold on!”

Glen’s eyes were defeated, pleading.

“What?”

“You mean I can’t own a dog, ever again?”

“Not ever.”

“But... but... dogs are my life. I love dogs.”

“And that’s why you should have never stole someone else’s.”

He sniffled, loud and wet.

“What am I supposed to do now?”

I frowned. Grown men crying like babies weren’t my favorite thing to watch. But this joker had brought it upon himself.

“Buy a cat,” I told him.

Then I walked back to my car, Marcus in tow.

* * *

“Marcus!”

I was watching, grinning, as Vincent Thorpe paid no mind to his expensive suit and rolled around on my floor with his dog, giggling like a caffeinated school boy.

“Mr. McGlade, how can I ever repay you?”

“Cash is good.”

He disentangled himself from the pooch long enough to pull out his wallet and hand over a fat wad of bills.

“Tell me, how did you know it was Glen Ricketts?”

“Simple. You said yourself that he was always one of your closest competitors, up until his dog died earlier this year.”

“But what about Ms. Cummings? I talked to her on the phone. I even dropped the dog off at her house, and she took him from me. Wasn’t she involved somehow?”

“The phone was easy— Ms. Cummings has a voice like a chainsaw. With practice, anyone can imitate a smoker’s croak. But Glen really got clever for the meeting. He picked a time when Ms. Cummings was out of town, and then he spent a good hour or two with *Max Factor*.”

“Excuse me?”

“Cosmetics. As you recall, Abigail Cummings wore enough make-up to cause back-problems. Who could tell what she looked like under all that gunk? Glen just slopped on enough to look like a circus clown, and then he impersonated her.”

Thorpe shook his head, clucking his tongue.

“So it wasn’t actually Abigail. It was Glen all along. Such a nice guy, too.”

“It’s the nice ones you have to watch.”

“So, now what? Should I call the police?”

“No need. Glen won’t be bothering you, or any dog owner, ever again.”

I gave him the quick version of the backyard scene.

“He deserves it, taking Marcus from me. But now I have you back, don’t I, boy?”

There was more wrestling, and once, he actually kissed Marcus on the mouth.

“Kind of unsanitary, isn’t it?”

“Are you kidding? A dog’s saliva is full of antiseptic properties.”

“I was speaking for Marcus.”

Thorpe laughed. “Friendship transcends species, Mr. McGlade. Speaking of which, where’s that Collie/Shepherd mix that Abigail gave you?”

“At the apartment.”

“See? You’ve made a new friend, yourself.”

“Nope. I’ve got a six o’clock appointment at the animal shelter. I’m getting him gassed.”

Thorpe shot me a surprised look.

“Mr. McGlade! After this whole ordeal, don’t you see what amazing companions canines are? A dog can enrich your life! All you have to do is give him a chance.”

I mulled it over. How bad could it be, having a friend who never borrowed money, stole

your girl, or talked behind your back?

“You know what, Mr. Thorpe? I may just give it a shot.”

When I got home a few hours later, I discovered my new best friend had chewed the padding off of my leather couch.

I made it to the shelter an hour before my scheduled appointment.

POOR CAREER CHOICE

An Andrew Mayhem Thriller by Jeff Strand

If you're like me, you spend a lot of time trying to joke your way out of socially awkward and/or potentially fatal situations. A good example of this took place one summer evening when I was relaxing in my recliner with the novel *Whose Blood Is In My Popcorn?*, which I'd been reading off and on for the past four years. I'm not an ambitious reader.

I looked across the living room into the kitchen and saw an extremely large man holding an extremely large knife. He had long greasy hair, was wearing a black leather jacket that had metal spikes around the wrists, and I sort of got the impression that he had broken into my home to kill me.

By "broken into," of course, I mean that he'd probably just casually walked in through the door in the kitchen that my wife Helen was always reminding me not to leave unlocked. She'd never specifically used a man with a knife as an example, but I'm pretty sure this is the kind of thing she was referring to.

"Are you here about the leaky faucet?" I asked.

Not my all-time funniest comment, I'll admit. Still, when you consider that I said it to a huge guy with a knife and a homicidal glimmer in his eye, it was a more than passable effort.

He shook his head. "No. I'm not."

"Oh."

I considered my options. The only weapons I had readily available were the dog-eared paperback and a grape juice box. I'd already drank most of the juice, so the box probably wouldn't even carry all the way across the living room if I threw it. However, the straw provided a defensive possibility.

I considered making a run for it. But when I say that the man was "extremely large," I don't mean that he was an obese gentleman who would chase after me in a labored waddle. Though it

was hard to tell under the jacket, he looked to be all muscle. And as he walked toward me, he moved with a grace and efficiency of motion that gave the impression that he could have me tackled to the ground and nicely decapitated before I even made it to the stairway.

But maybe not. After all, I'm rather nimble myself. I decided to let this one play out and wait for the precise moment to act.

"Are you Andrew Mayhem?" he asked.

"Yes," I said, a split-second before I realized that the more intelligent answer would be "No."

He stood in front of me and held up the knife. "I've been hired to kill you, Mr. Mayhem."

I lowered the recliner's footrest. "By whom?"

"I can't say."

"You can say if you're going to kill me, right? I promise not to scrawl the name in my own blood on the carpet."

He shook his head. "No, I'd get in trouble."

"If you're going to kill me, you've at least got to let me know who wants me dead. Give my ghost something to avenge."

"I don't know..."

"It's the least you could do."

"Hey, I waited two weeks for you to be alone in the house. I could've done this while your wife and kids were home. Would you want your wife and kids to see you die? Would you?"

"Helen would kick your ass."

The hit man smiled. "She sure puts you in your place. Damn, but you're whipped."

"Not whipped. Henpecked."

"Whatever."

"Y'know, you may be here to kill me, but you're still a guest in my home. Let's be respectful, okay?"

"Fine with me. I'm not here to talk. I'm here to cut myself a slice of bitch."

I stared at him for a long moment.

"Did you just say you're here to cut yourself a slice of bitch?"

He nodded.

"Was that, like, a planned comment? Did you actually come in here with the intention of

speaking those exact words?"

"What's wrong with them?"

"What does that even mean?"

"It means that you're a bitch, and I'm here to cut a slice of you."

"No, no, no, no, no, that doesn't work at all. Trust me on this. Have you really said that to other human beings? What was their reaction?"

"I haven't said it to anybody else."

"Good. Don't. What do you usually say in this situation?"

The assassin looked a bit sheepish. "Actually, you're my first hit."

"Seriously?"

"Yeah."

"Oh, well, that explains it. I know that you were trying to sound all cold-blooded and stuff, but the only reaction you're going to get is 'Oh, crap, I'm gonna be murdered by a doofus.' What's your name?"

"Victor."

"Hi, Victor." I extended my hand politely. He didn't shake it. I figured I probably should have seen that bit of rudeness coming and placed my hand back on my lap. "Listen, you need a catch phrase that doesn't make you sound like a street punk. Something sinister but classy. Because I'll be honest with you, right now I should be so scared that I can barely keep my urine on the inside, and I'm just not feeling it."

"I bet you'd feel it if I stuck this knife in you."

"I'm sure I would. But if you're an assassin, you need to be memorable. You need to be stylish. I mean, any common hooligan can run somebody over with a car, but you, you're the kind of guy who gets up close and personal with a knife. It's all about the presentation. You need to leave a lasting impression."

Victor nodded almost imperceptibly, as if he were considering my advice. Then he scowled as if suddenly realizing that he'd become the kind of assassin who listened to helpful hints from people he was supposed to kill. "No, I don't. You'll be dead!"

"Yeah, but this isn't about me. It's about you. I might be dead either way, but how would *you* feel if I died thinking that your hit man persona was sub-par?"

Victor shrugged. "I get paid either way."

"Is it just about the money, though?"

"Sure."

"Do you really believe that?"

"I kill for money. That's what an assassin does. When I slit your throat, I won't feel a thing."

I wasn't happy that the conversation had turned to slit throats, and I shifted uncomfortably in my seat. "How many people have you killed?"

"I told you, you're my first."

"You haven't killed *anybody*? Not even for recreation?"

He shook his head.

"What about animals?"

"No animals."

"Have you ever flushed a goldfish?"

"Look, I don't need to have dozens of corpses stacked in my closet to deal with somebody like you. I can kill you. It's not a problem."

"I'm not trying to be a pain here," I insisted. "I'm just wondering how you got the gig of terminating me without any previous murder credits."

"I sorta fell into the job. You know how it goes."

"You padded your resume, didn't you?"

"That's none of your concern."

"You did! You lied about your experience! What are you going to do if your boss finds out?"

"I didn't lie about anything."

I shook my head and made a tsk-tsk sound. "Lying by omission is still a lie."

"You know what? I've had way more than enough of you." Victor pointed the knife at my throat. "Got anything else to say before I gut you?"

"That's not where the knife should be pointed if you're planning to gut me."

"Don't tell me how to do my job."

"I'm just saying. Not many guts in my neck."

"Sure there are."

"Do you even know what a gut is?"

"That's it. You're dead, Mayhem."

"My name's not Mayhem."

He blinked. "What?"

"Are you looking for Andrew Mayhem? He lives next door. Shorter guy, glasses..."

"You said you were Andrew Mayhem."

"Your knife made me nervous. I wasn't thinking."

He looked at me for about three seconds as if trying to decide if I was lying, and then clearly decided that I was, in fact, lying. "You know what? I'd kill you for free," he said.

"How much are you getting paid?"

"None of your business."

"Of course it's my business! I have a right to know my market value. How much?"

"I don't discuss salary with anybody. And it's time for you to die."

"You keep saying that, and yet my guts are still sealed up in my neck."

Victor looked so angry and frustrated that I thought he might scream. I used the opportunity to strike.

"Did you just throw a fucking juice box at me?" he asked, rubbing his forehead.

"I did."

"You...you...there's something wrong with you, man! How is it possible that nobody else has murdered you yet?"

"See, Victor, you're not listening. This isn't about me. It's about—"

He began to pace around my living room, wildly swinging the knife. "You know what, I didn't even *want* this crappy job! I was happy at the Wal-Mart! I'm just trying to earn enough money to go back to school! I didn't ask to get hit in the head by a goddamn juice box!"

I noticed to my horror that the juice box, which lay on its side, had leaked some grape juice onto the carpet. Helen was going to go ballistic when she got home. The juice boxes were never, ever to be consumed in the living room. Granted, the rule was intended for my children, Theresa and Kyle, but I'd get in just as much trouble. Damn.

Victor continued pacing back and forth across my floor, alternating between shouting in frustration and muttering silently. I kind of felt sorry for him. I still held the straw, and tried to figure out how good my chances were of plunging it into his eye when he wasn't looking.

Suddenly he turned to me, eyes wide with fury, raised the knife over his head, and brought it down toward my face—

—stopping a few inches from my nose.

It occurred to me that a substantial portion of my plan had revolved around the idea that I would break out my lightning-fast reflexes to escape from danger at the exact moment when Victor finally snapped. But if Victor hadn't stopped the knife's downward trajectory by his own choice, I would probably have a blade sticking deep into my face. T'was not a pleasant thought.

"I'm sorry," I said.

Victor lowered the knife. "This job sucks," he said.

"Most jobs do."

I realized that my palms were sweating profusely now that I'd come so close to being stabbed in the nostrils, and my stomach kind of hurt. What had happened to my lightning fast reflexes? The knife could have gone all the way through my nose and up into my brain! I'd be *dead*! And then Victor would collect his paycheck even though he was a below-average assassin!

I wiped my palms off on my jeans, hoping he wouldn't notice.

"Did I scare you?" he asked.

"No."

"I bet I did."

"Okay, yeah, you did, but that knife looks sharp, all right? You can't expect me not to be a little uncomfortable when you're trying to stab me with it."

"I bet you almost wet your pants."

"Would it make you feel better if I had?"

He shook his head. "That would probably be awkward."

"Yeah, for me too."

He sighed. I sighed back.

"Why didn't you finish stabbing me?" I asked.

"Dunno."

"Are you having second thoughts?"

"Maybe. I just...do you ever feel like you're playing a part that isn't really *you*? I mean, I feel ridiculous in this spiked jacket. What do you think?"

"Honestly, I thought the jacket was pretty cool."

"It's too hot. And it doesn't fit right in the back. And these spiky things keep scraping on furniture and stuff. I wonder if I should just give up the whole idea of killing people for a living.

I don't think I'm cut out for it. I like being the lovable guy. I like being cuddly."

"Cuddly is good. So how much trouble will you get in if you don't kill me?"

"I'm not sure. Not too much. He was only paying me fifty bucks."

"Fifty bucks? *Fifty*?"

"Yeah."

"My life is only worth fifty dollars? Are you kidding me?"

"Is that low?"

"Of course it's low! Holy crap, I was thinking you were making at least five figures, probably six!"

"I made seven dollars an hour at Wal-Mart."

"I can't believe you would kill me for fifty bucks. That's just insulting. Who hired you?"

"Todd McBride."

"Don't know him. But people try to kill me every once in a while. It's just part of being me. But...fifty bucks? You'd pay an exterminator more than that to kill some bugs! Perhaps you should leave."

"Yeah."

"Sorry this didn't work out."

"Me too. I'll resign in the morning. I didn't really want to see sliced flesh anyway." He turned around, took a step toward the kitchen, then hesitated and returned his attention to me.

"You know, I'm out fifty bucks."

"Yeah, and...?"

"Maybe you could pitch in a little. It doesn't have to be the whole fifty, but something for my time would be nice."

"I'll be honest with you. Paying somebody not to kill me would feel sort of like paying for sex."

"You're just saying that because your wife monitors the finances, aren't you?"

"No, I'm saying it because it would make me feel icky."

Victor frowned. "Oh."

"Sorry."

He stood there for a moment, silent.

"Well, do you have any of those juice boxes left?"

"I think there's one in the fridge."

"Thanks."

"Don't take the cherry one."

"Okay."

Victor wandered into the kitchen and rummaged through the refrigerator. I heard him leave and sat on the recliner for a while, more than a little annoyed. I couldn't even get back into my book.

Still, at least I was alive. And I'd helped Victor realize that the life of a killer-for-hire wasn't for just anybody with access to a bladed weapon. So the evening wasn't a total loss. In fact, since I now knew that my lightning fast reflexes needed to be honed, I had fodder for self-improvement.

If you really thought about it, it was a very worthwhile experience.

I returned to the novel, feeling good.

Then Helen came home and I got in trouble because I forgot to clean up the grape juice on the carpet. So the rest of the night sucked.

TAKEN TO THE CLEANERS

A Harry McGlade Mystery by JA Konrath

“I want you to kill the man that my husband hired to kill the man that I hired to kill my husband.”

If I had been paying attention, I still wouldn't have understood what she wanted me to do. But I was busy looking at her legs, which weren't adequately covered by her skirt. She had great legs, curvy without being heavy, tan and long, and she had them crossed in that sexy way that women cross their legs, knee over knee, not the ugly way that guys do it, with the ankle on the knee, though if she did cross her legs that way it would have been sexy too.

“Mr. McGlade, did you hear what I just said?”

“Hmm? Yeah, sure I did, baby. The man, the husband, I got it.”

“So you'll do it?”

“Do what?”

“Kill the man that my husband—”

I held up my hand. “Whoa. Hold it right there. I'm just a plain old private eye. That's what is says on the door you just walked through. The door even has a big magnifying glass silhouette logo thingy painted on it, which I paid way too much money for, just so no one gets confused. I don't kill people for money. Absolutely, positively, no way.” I leaned forward a little. “But, for the sake of argument, how much money are we talking about here?”

“I don't know where else to turn.”

The tears came, and she buried her face in her hands, giving me the opportunity to look at her legs again. Marietta Garbonzo had found me through the ad I placed in the Chicago phone book. The ad used the expensive magnifying glass logo, along with the tagline, *Harry McGlade Investigators: We'll Do Whatever it Takes*. It brought in more customers than my last tagline: *No Job Too Small, No Fee Too High*, or the one prior to that, *We'll Investigate Your Privates*.

Mrs. Garbonzo had never been to a private eye before, and she was playing her role to the hilt. Besides the short skirt and tight blouse, she had gone to town with the hair and make-up; her blonde locks curled and sprayed, her lips painted deep, glossy red, her purple eye shadow so thick that she managed to get some on her collar.

“My husband beats me, Mr. McGlade. Do you know why?”

“Beats me,” I said, shrugging. Her wailing kicked in again. I wondered where she worked out. Legs like that, she must work out.

“He’s insane, Mr. McGlade. We’ve been married for a year, and Roy always had a temper. I once saw him attack another man with a tire iron. They were having an argument, Roy went out to the car, grabbed a crow bar from the trunk, then came back and practically killed him.”

“Where do you work out?”

“Excuse me?”

“Exercise. Do you belong to a gym, or work out at home?”

“Mr. McGlade, I’m trying to tell you about my husband.”

“I know, the insane guy who beats you. Probably shouldn’t have married a guy who used a tire iron for anything other than changing tires.”

“I married too young. But while we were dating, he treated me kindly. It was only after we married that the abuse began.”

She turned her head away and unbuttoned her blouse. My gaze shifted from her legs to her chest. She had a nice chest, packed tight into a silky black bra with lace around the edges and an underwire that displayed things to a good effect, both lifting and separating.

“See these bruises?”

“Hmm?”

“It’s humiliating to reveal them, but I don’t know where else to go.”

“Does he hit you anywhere else? You can show me, I’m a professional.”

The tears returned. “I hired a man to kill him, Mr. McGlade. I hired a man to kill my husband. But somehow Roy found out about it, and he hired a man to kill the man I hired. So I’d like you to kill his man so my man can kill him.”

I removed the bottle of whiskey from my desk that I keep there for medicinal purposes, like getting drunk. I unscrewed the cap, wiped off the bottle neck with my tie, and handed it to her.

“You’re not making sense, Mrs. Garbonzo. Have a swig of this.”

“I shouldn’t. When I drink I lose my inhibitions.”

“Keep the bottle.”

She took a sip, coughing after it went down.

“I already paid the assassin. I paid him a lot of money, and he won’t refund it. But I’m afraid he’ll die before he kills my husband, so I need someone to kill the man who is after him.”

“Shouldn’t you tell the guy you hired that he’s got a hit on him?”

“I called him. He says not to worry. But I am worried, Mr. McGlade.”

“As I said before, I don’t kill people for money.”

“Even if you’re killing someone who kills people for money?”

“But I’d be killing someone who is killing someone who kills people for money. What prevents that killer from hiring someone to kill me because he’s killing someone who is killing someone that I... hand me that bottle.”

I took a swig.

“Please, Mr. McGlade. I’m a desperate woman. I’ll do anything.”

She walked around the desk and stood before me, shivering in her bra, her breath coming out in short gasps through red, wet lips. Her hands rested on my shoulders, squeezing, and she bent forward.

“My laundry,” I said.

“What?”

“Do my laundry.”

“Mr. McGlade, I’m offering you my body.”

“And it’s a tempting offer, Mrs. Garbonzo. But that will take, what, five minutes? I’ve got about six loads of laundry back at my place, they take an hour for each cycle.”

“Isn’t there a dry cleaner in your neighborhood?”

“A hassle. I’d have to write my name on all the labels, on every sock, on the elastic band of my whitey tighties, plus haul six bags of clothes down the street. You want me to help you? I get five hundred a day, plus expenses. And you do my laundry.”

“And you’ll kill him?”

“No. I don’t kill people for money. Or for laundry. But I’ll protect your guy from getting whacked.”

“Thank you, Mr. McGlade.”

She leaned down to kiss me. Not wanting to appear rude, I let her. And so she didn't feel unwanted, I stuck my hand up her skirt.

"You won't tell the police, will you Mr. McGlade?"

"Look, baby, I'm not your priest and I'm not your lawyer and I'm not your shrink. I'm just a man. A man who will keep his mouth shut, except when I'm eating. Or talking, or sleeping, because sometimes I sleep with my mouth open because I have the apnea."

"Thank you, Mr. McGlade."

"I'll take the first week in advance, Visa and MasterCard are fine. Here are my spare keys."

"Your keys?"

"For my apartment. It's in Hyde Park. I don't have a hamper, so I leave my dirty clothes all over the floor. Do the bed sheets too—those haven't been washed since, well, ever. Washer and dryer are in the basement of the building, washer costs seventy-five cents, dryer costs fifty cents for each thirty minutes, and the heavy things like jeans and sweaters take about a buck fifty to dry. Make yourself at home, but don't touch anything, sit on anything, eat any of my food, or turn on the TV."

I gave her my address, and she gave me a check and all of her info. The info was surprising.

"You hired a killer from the personal ads in *Famous Soldier Magazine*?"

"I didn't know where else to go."

"How about the police? A divorce attorney?"

"My husband is a rich and powerful man, Mr. McGlade. You don't recognize his name?"

I flipped through my mental Rolodex. "Roy Garbonzo? Is he the Roy Garbonzo that owns Happy Roy's Chicken Shack?"

"Yes."

"He seems so happy on those commercials."

"He's a beast, Mr. McGlade."

"The guy is like a hundred and thirty years old. And on those commercials, he's always laughing and signing and dancing with that claymation chicken. He's the guy that's abusing you?"

"Would you like to see the proof again?"

"If it isn't too much trouble."

She grabbed my face in one hand, squeezing my cheeks together.

“Happy Roy is a vicious psycho, Mr. McGlade. He’s a brutal, misogynist pig who enjoys inflicting pain.”

“He’s probably rich too.”

Mrs. Garbonzo narrowed her eyes. “He’s wealthy, yes. What are you implying?”

“I like his extra spicy recipe. Do you get to take chicken home for free? You probably have a fridge stuffed full of it, am I right?”

She released my face and buttoned up her blouse.

“I have to go. My husband gets paranoid when I go out.”

“Maybe because when you go out, you hire people to kill him.”

She picked up her purse and headed for the door. “I expect you to call me when you’ve made some progress.”

“That includes ironing,” I called after her. “And hanging the stuff up. I don’t have any hangers, so you’ll have to buy some.”

After she left, I turned off all the office lights and closed the blinds, because what I had to do next, I had to do in complete privacy.

I took a nap.

When I awoke a few hours later, I went to the bank, cashed Mrs. Garbonzo’s check, and went to start earning my money.

My first instinct was to dive head-first into the belly of the beast and confront Mrs. Garbonzo’s hired hitman help. My second instinct was to get some nachos, maybe a beer or two.

I went with my second instinct. The nachos were good, spicy but not so much that all you tasted was peppers. After the third beer I hopped in my ride and headed for the assassin’s headquarters, which turned out to be in a well-to-do suburb of Chicago called Barrington. The development I pulled into boasted some amazingly huge houses, complete with big lawns and swimming pools and trimmed bushes that looked like corkscrews and lollipops. I double-checked the address I’d scribbled down, then pulled into a long circular driveway and up to a home that was bigger than the public school I attended, and I came from the city where they grew schools big.

The hitman biz must be booming.

I half expected some sort of maid or butler to answer the door, but instead I was greeted by a fifty-something woman, her facelift sporting a deep tan. I appraised her.

“If you stay out in the sun, the wrinkles will come back.”

“Then I’ll just have more work done.” Her voice was steady, cultured. “Are you here to clean the pool?”

“I’m here to speak to William Johansenn.”

“Billy? Sure, he’s in the basement.”

She let me in. Perhaps all rich suburban women were fearless and let strange guys into their homes. Or perhaps this one simply didn’t care. I didn’t get a chance to ask, because she walked off just as I entered.

“Lady? Where’s the basement?”

“Down the hall, stairs to the right,” she said without turning around.

I took a long, tiled hallway past a powder room, a den, and a door that opened to a descending staircase. Heavy metal music blared up at me.

“Billy!” I called down.

My effort was fruitless—with the noise, I couldn’t even hear myself. The lights were off, and squinting did nothing to penetrate the darkness.

Surprising a paid assassin in his own lair wasn’t on the list of 100 things I longed to do before I die, but I didn’t see much of a choice. I beer-belched, then went down the stairs.

The basement was furnished, though furnished didn’t seem to be the right word. The floor had carpet, and the walls had paint, and there seemed to be furniture, but I couldn’t really tell because everything was covered with food wrappers, pop cans, dirty clothing, and discarded magazines. It looked like a 7-Eleven exploded.

William “Billy” Johansenn was asleep on a waterbed, a copy of *Creem* open on his chest. He had a galaxy of pimples dotting his forehead and six curly hairs sprouting from his chin.

He couldn’t have been a day over sixteen.

I killed the stereo. Billy continued to snore. Among the clutter on the floor were several issues of *Famous Soldier*, along with various gun and hunting magazines. I poked through his drawers and found a cheap Rambo knife, a CO₂ powered BB gun, and a dog-eared copy of the infamous *How to be a Hitman* book from Paladin Press.

I gave the kid a shake, then another. The third shake got him to open his eyes.

“Who the hell are you?” he said, defiant.

“I’m your wake-up call.”

I slapped the kid, making his eyes cross.

“Hey! You hit me!”

“A woman hired you to kill her husband.”

“I don’t know what you’re—“

He got another smack. “That’s for lying.”

“You can’t hit me,” he whined. “I’ll sue you.”

I hit him twice more; once because I didn’t like being threatened by punk kids, and once because I didn’t like lawyers. When I pulled my palm back for threesies, the kid broke.

“Please! Stop it! I admit it!”

I released his t-shirt and let him blubber for a minute. His blue eyes matched those of the woman upstairs. Not many professional killers lived in their mother’s basement, and I wondered how Marietta Garbonzo could have been this naive.

“I’m guessing you never met Mrs. Garbonzo in person.”

“I only talked to her on the phone. She sent the money to a P.O. Box. That’s how the pros do it.”

“So how did she get your home address?”

“She wouldn’t give me the money without my address. She said if I didn’t trust her, why should she trust me?”

Here was my proof that each new generation of teenagers was stupider than the last. I blame MTV.

“How much did she give you?”

He smiled, showing me a mouth full of braces. “Fifty large.”

“And how were you going to do it? With your BB gun?”

“I was going to follow him around and then... you know... shove him.”

“Shove him?”

“He’s an old guy. I was thinking I’d shove him down some stairs, or into traffic. I dunno.”

“Have you shoved a lot of old people into traffic, Billy boy?”

He must not have liked the look in my eyes, because he shrunk two sizes.

“No! Never! I never killed anybody!”

“So why put an ad in the magazine?”

“I dunno. Something to do.”

I considered hitting him again, but didn't know what purpose it would serve.

I hit him anyway.

"Ow! My lip's caught in my braces!"

"You pimple-faced little moron. Do you have any idea what kind of trouble you're in right now? Not only did you accept money to commit a felony, but now you've got a price on your head. Did Mrs. Garbonzo tell you about the guy her husband hired to kill you?"

He nodded, his Adam's apple wiggling like a fish.

"Are-are you here to kill me?"

"No."

"But you've got a gun." He pointed to the butt of my Magnum, jutting out of my shoulder holster.

"I'm a private detective."

"Is that a real gun?"

"Yes."

"Can I touch it?"

"No."

"Come on. Lemme touch it."

This is what happens when you spare the rod and spoil the child.

"Look kid, I know that you're a loser that nobody likes, and that you're a virgin and will probably stay one for the next ten years, but do you want to die?"

"Ten years?"

"Answer the question."

"No. I don't want to die."

I sighed. "That's a start. Where's the money?"

"I've got a secret place. In the wall."

He rolled off the bed, eager, and pried a piece of paneling away from the plaster in a less-cluttered corner of the room. His hand reached in, and came out with a brown paper shopping bag.

"Is it all there?"

Billy shook his head. "I spent three hundred on a wicked MP3 player."

"Hand over the money. And the MP3 player."

Billy showed a bit of reluctance, so I smacked him again to help with his motivation.

It helped. He also gave me fresh batteries for the player.

“Now what?” he sniffled.

“Now we tell your parents.”

“Do we have to?”

“You’d prefer the cops?”

He shook his head. “No. No cops.”

“That blonde upstairs with the face like a snare drum, that your mom?”

“Yeah.”

“Let’s go have a talk with her.”

Mrs. Johansenn was perched in front of a sixty inch television, watching a soap.

“Nice TV. High definition?”

“Plasma.”

“Nice. Billy has something he wants to tell you.”

Billy stared at his shoes. “Mom, I bought an ad in the back of *Famous Soldier Magazine*, and some lady gave me fifty thousand dollars to kill her husband.”

Mrs. Johansenn hit the mute button on the remote, shaking her head in obvious disappointment.

“Billy, dammit, this is too much. You’re a hired killer?”

“Sorry,” he mumbled.

“You’re father is going to have a stroke when he hears this.”

“Do we have to tell Dad?”

“Are you kidding?”

“I’m gave the money back.”

“Who are you?” Billy’s mom squinted at me.

“I’m Harry McGlade. I’m a private eye. I was hired to find Billy. Someone is trying to kill him.”

Mrs. Johansenn rolled her eyes. “Oh, this gets better and better. I need to call Sal.”

“You husband?”

“My lawyer.”

“Ma’am, a lawyer isn’t going to do much to save Billy’s life, unless he’s standing between

him and a bullet.”

“So what then, the police?”

“Not the cops, Mom! I don’t want to go to jail!”

“He won’t survive in prison,” I said. “The lifers will pass him around like a bong at a college party. They’ll trade him for candy bars and cigarettes.”

“I don’t want to be traded for candy bars, Mom!”

Mrs. Johansenn frowned, forming new wrinkles. “Then what should we do, Mr. McGlade?”

I paused for a moment, then I grinned.

“I get five-hundred a day, plus expenses.”

* * *

I celebrated my recent windfall with a nice dinner at a nice restaurant. I was more of a burger and fries guy than a steak and lobster guy, but the steak and lobster went down easy, and after leaving a 17% tip I headed to Evanston to visit the Chicken King.

Roy Garbonzo’s estate made the Johansenn’s look like a third world mud hut. He had his own private access road, a giant wrought iron perimeter fence, and a uniformed guard posted at the gate. I was wondering how to play it when the aforementioned uniformed guard knocked on my window.

“I need to see Roy Garbonzo,” I told him. “My son choked to death on a Sunny Meal toy.”

“He’s expecting you, Mr. McGlade.”

The gate rolled back, and I drove up to the mansion. It looked like five mansions stuck together. I parked between two massive Doric columns and pressed the buzzer next to the giant double doors. Before anyone answered, a startling thought flashed through my head.

How did the guard know my name?

“It’s a set up,” I said aloud. I yanked the Magnum out of my shoulder holster and dove into one of the hydrangea bushes flanking the entryway just as the knob turned.

I peeked through the lavender blooms, finger on the trigger, watching the door swing open. A sinister-looking man wearing a tuxedo stepped out of the house and peered down his nose at me.

“Would Mr. McGlade care for a drink?”

“You’re a butler,” I said.

“Observant of you, sir.”

“You work for Roy Garbonzo.”

“An excellent deduction, sir. A drink?”

“Uh—whiskey, rocks.”

“Would you care to have it in the parlor, sir, or would you prefer to remain squatting in the Neidersachen?”

“I thought it was a hydrangea.”

“It’s a hydrangea Neidersachen, sir.”

“It’s pretty,” I said. “But I think I’ll take that drink inside.”

“Very good, sir.”

I extricated myself from the Neidersachen, brushed off some clinging leaves, and followed Jeeves through the tiled foyer, through the carpeted library, and into the parlor, which had wood floors and an ornate Persian rug big enough to park a bus on.

“Please have a seat, sir. Mr. Garbonzo will be with you shortly. Were you planning on shooting him?”

“Excuse me?”

“You’re holding a gun, sir.”

I glanced down at my hand, still clenched around my Magnum.

“Sorry. Forgot.”

I holstered the .44 and sat in a high backed leather chair, which was so plush I sank four inches. Waddles returned with my whiskey, and I sipped it and stared at the paintings hanging on the walls. One in particular caught my interest, of a nude woman eating grapes.

“Admiring the Degas?” a familiar voice boomed from behind.

I turned and saw Happy Roy the vicious misogynist psycho, all five foot two inches of him, walking up to me. He wore an expensive silk suit, but like most old men the waist was too high, making him seem more hunched over than he actually was. On his feet were slippers, and his glasses had black plastic frames and looked thick enough to stop a bullet.

“Her name is Degas?” I asked. “Silly name for a chick.”

He held out his hand and I shook it, noticing his knuckles were swollen and bruised.

“Degas is the painter, Mr. McGlade. My business advisors thought it was a good investment. Do you like it?”

“Not really. She’s got too much in back, not enough up front, and her face is a double-

bagger.”

“A double-bagger?”

“I’d make her wear two bags over her head, in case one fell off.”

The Chicken King laughed. “I always thought she was ugly too. Apparently, this little lady was the ideal beauty hundreds of years ago.”

“Or maybe Degas just liked ugly, pear-shaped chicks. How did you know I was coming, Mr. Garbonzo?”

He sat in the chair across from me, sinking in so deep he had trouble seeing over his knees.

“Please, call me Happy Roy. I’ve been having my wife followed, Mr. McGlade. The man I hired tailed her to your office. Does that surprise you?”

“Why should I be surprised? I remember that she came to my office.”

“What I meant was, are you surprised I’m having my wife followed?”

I considered it. “No. She’s young, beautiful, and you look like a Caucasian version of one of the California Raisins.”

“I remember those commercials. That’s where I got the idea for the claymation chicken in the Chicken Shack spots. Expensive to produce, those commercials.”

“Enough of the small talk. I want you to call off your goon.”

“My goon?”

“The person your wife hired to whack you, he’s a teenage kid living in the suburbs. He’s not a real threat.”

“I’m aware of that.”

“So you don’t need to have that kid killed.”

“Mr. McGlade, I’m not having anyone killed. I’m Happy Roy. I don’t kill people. I promote world peace through deep fried poultry. I simply told my wife that I hired a killer, even though I didn’t.”

“You lied to her?”

Happy Roy let out a big, dramatic sigh. “When I found out she wanted me dead, I was justifiably annoyed. I confronted her, we got into an argument, and I told her that I’d have her assassin killed. I was trying to get her to call it off on her own.”

I absorbed this information, drinking more whiskey. When the whiskey ran out, I sucked on an ice cube.

“Tho wmer mmmpt wooor—“

”Excuse me? I can’t understand you with that ice in your mouth.”

I spit out the ice. “She said you abuse her. That you’re insane.”

“The only thing insane about me is my upcoming promotion. Buy a box of chicken, get a second box for half price.”

I wondered if I should tell him about the bruises she had, but chose to keep silent.

“What about divorce?”

“I love Marietta, Mr. McGlade. I know she’s too young for me. I know she’s a devious, back-stabbing maneater. That just makes her more adorable.”

“She wants you dead.”

“All spouses have their quirks.”

I leaned forward, an effort because my butt was sunk so low in the chair.

“Happy Roy, I have no doubt that Marietta will kill you if she can. When this doesn’t pan out, she’ll try something else. Eventually, she’ll hook up with a real assassin.”

Happy Roy’s eye became hooded, dark. “She’s my wife, Mr. McGlade. I’ll deal with her my way.”

“By beating her?”

“This conversation is over. I’ll have my butler show you to the door.”

I pried myself out of the chair. “You’re disgustingly rich, powerful, and not a bad looking guy for someone older than God. Let Marietta go and find some other bimbo to play with.”

“Good bye, Mr. McGlade. Feel free to keep working for my wife.”

“Are you trying to pay me off, so I drop this case?”

“No. Not at all.”

“If you were thinking about paying me off, how much money would we be talking?”

“I’m not trying to pay you off, Mr. McGlade.”

I got in the smaller man’s face. “You might be able to afford fat Degas and huge estates, but I’m a person, Happy Roy. And no matter how rich you get, you’ll never be able to buy a human being. Because it’s illegal, Happy Roy. Buying people is illegal.”

“I’m not trying to buy you!”

“I’ll find my own way out.”

I stormed out of the parlor, through the library, into the dining room, into another parlor, or

maybe it was a den, and then I wound up in the kitchen somehow. I tried to back track, wandered into the dining room, and then found myself back in one of the parlors, but I couldn't tell if it was the first parlor or the second parlor. I didn't see that painting of the naked heifer, but Happy Roy may have taken it down just to confuse me.

"Hello?" I called out. "I'm a little lost here."

No one answered.

I went back into the dining room, then the kitchen, and took another door which led down a hallway which led to a bathroom, which was fine because I needed to go to the bathroom anyway.

When the lizard had been adequately drained, I discovered some very interesting prescription drugs, just lying there, in the medicine cabinet.

And then it all made sense.

Forty minutes later I found the front door and headed back to my apartment.

Time to drop the truth on Little Miss Marietta.

* * *

At first, I thought I had the wrong place. Everything was so... *clean*. Not only were all of my clothes picked up, but the apartment had been vacuumed—a real feat since I didn't think I owned a vacuum cleaner.

"Mrs. Garbonzo? You here?"

I walked into the bedroom. The bed had been made, and the closet door was open, revealing over a dozen shirts on hangers.

In the kitchen, the sink was empty of dishes for the first time since I rented the place fifteen years ago. There was even a fresh smell of lilacs and orange zest in the air.

The door opened and I swung around, hand going to my gun. Mrs. Garbonzo entered, carrying a plastic laundry basket overflowing with my socks. She flinched when she saw me.

"Mr. McGlade. I didn't expect you back so soon."

"Surprised, Marietta? I thought you might be."

"Did you take care of the guy?"

"Sit down. We need to talk."

She set the basket down on my kitchen counter, and seductively perched herself on one of my breakfast bar stools. Her blouse had been untucked from her skirt, the shirt tails tied in a knot

around her flat stomach.

“You lied to me, Marietta.”

“Lied?” She batted her eyelashes. “How?”

There was a bottle of window cleaner next to the sink that I’d never seen before. I picked it up.

“How about opening up that shirt and letting me squirt you with this?”

“Is that what turns you on? Spraying women with glass cleaner?”

I grabbed her blouse and pulled, tearing buttons.

“I was thinking more along the lines of washing off those fake bruises. They’re so fake, the purple has even rubbed off on your collar. See?”

I shot two quick streams at the marks, then used my sleeve to wipe them off.

They didn’t wipe off.

I tried again, to similar effect.

Marietta sneered at me. “Are you finished?”

“So what’s that purple stuff on your collar?”

“Eye shadow.” She pointed at her eyes. “That’s why it matches my eye shadow.”

“Big deal. So you gave yourself those bruises. Or paid someone to give them to you. I met your husband today, Mrs. Garbonzo. All ninety pounds of him. He couldn’t beat up a quadriplegic.”

“My husband abuses me, Mr. McGlade.”

“Yeah, I saw his swollen knuckles. At first, I thought they were swollen from hitting you. But he didn’t hit you, did he Marietta? Roy has rheumatoid arthritis. I saw his medication. His knuckles are swollen because of his disease, and they undoubtedly cause him great pain. So much pain, he’d never be able to hit you.”

Marietta put her hands on her hips.

“He beats me with a belt, Mr. McGlade.”

“A belt?”

“These bruises are from the buckle. It also causes welts. See?”

She turned around, lifting her blouse. Angry, red scabs stretched across her back.

I gave them a spritz of the window cleaner, just to be sure.

“Ow!”

“Sorry. Had to check.”

Marietta faced me. “I’ve paid you, I’ve done your laundry, and I’ve cleaned your apartment. Did you take care of the assassin for me?”

“Your husband didn’t hire an assassin.”

“Is that what he told you?”

“I know it for a fact. The guy you hired is a sixteen year old pimply-faced kid. He couldn’t whack anyone. He couldn’t even whack a mole.”

I smiled at my pun.

Marietta made a face. “I thought he sounded young on the phone. He really won’t do it?”

“He lives in his parent’s basement.”

The tears came. “I gave him a lot of money. Everything I’ve been able to hide from Roy during six years of marriage.”

I thought about mentioning I got the money back, but decided against it.

“Look, Marietta, just divorce the guy.”

“I can’t. He threatened to kill me if I divorced him.”

“You can run away. Hire a lawyer.”

She sniffled. “Pre-nup.”

“Pre-nup?”

“I signed a pre-nuptial agreement. If I divorce Roy, I don’t get a penny. And after six years of abuse, I deserve more than that.” She licked her lips. “But if he dies, I get it all.”

“Don’t you think killing the guy is a little extreme?”

She threw herself at me, teary-eyed and heaving. “Please, Harry. You have to help me. I’ll give you half—half of the entire chicken empire. Help me kill the son of a bitch.”

“Marietta…”

“I cleaned your place, you promised you’d help.” She added a little grinding action to her hug. “Please kill him for me.”

I looked around the kitchen. She did do a pretty good job. I wondered, briefly, if I’d make a decent Chicken King.

“I’ll tell you what, Marietta. I don’t do that kind of thing. But I know someone who can help. Do you want me to make a phone call?”

“Yes. Oh, yes.”

I pried myself out of her grasp and picked up the phone, dialing the number from memory.

“Hi, partner. It’s me. Look, I’ve got a woman here who wants to kill her husband. I told her I’m not interested, but I thought maybe you’d be able to set something up. Say, tomorrow, around noon? You can meet her at the Hilton. Rent a room under the name *Lipshultz*. No, *schultz*, with a *ul*. Okay, she’ll be there.”

I hung up. “Got it all set for you, sugar.”

She squeezed me tight and kissed my neck. “Thanks, Harry. Thank you so much. Is there anything I can do to repay you?” Her breath was hot in my ear. “Anything at all?”

“You can start by folding those socks. And maybe some dusting. Yeah, dusting would be good.”

She smiled wickedly and caressed my cheek. “I was thinking of something a little more intimate.”

“I was thinking about dinner.”

“Dinner would be wonderful.”

“I’m sure it will be. Have the place dusted by the time I get back.”

* * *

Marietta Garbonzo called me the next night, around eight in the evening.

“You son of a bitch! You set me up! You didn’t call a hitman! You called a cop!”

“You can’t go around murdering people, sweetheart. It’s wrong on so many levels.”

“But what about all of the washing? The cleaning? The dusting? And what about after dinner? What we did? How could you betray me after that?”

“You expect me to throw away all of my principles because we spent five minutes doing the worm? It was fun, but not worth twenty to life.”

“You bastard. When I get out of here I’ll...”

I hung up and went back to the *Sharper Image* catalog I’d been thumbing through. I had my eye on one of those massaging easy chairs. That would set me back two grand. Earlier that day, I bought a sixty inch plasma TV. The money I took from William “Billy” Johansenn was being put to good use.

I plopped down in front of the TV, found the wrestling channel, and settled in to watch two hours of pay-per-view sports entertainment. The Iron Commie had Captain Frankenbeef in a suplex when I felt the gun press against the back of my head.

“Hello, Mr. McGlade.”

“Happy Roy?”

“Yes. Stand up, slowly. Then turn around.”

I followed instructions. Happy Roy held a four barreled COP .357, a nasty weapon that could do a lot of damage at close range.

“How’d you get in?” I asked.

“You gave a key to my wife, you moron. I took it from her last night, when she got home.”

His face got mean. “After you slept with her.”

“Technically, we didn’t do any sleeping.”

The gun trembled in Happy Roy’s hand.

“She’s in jail now, Mr. McGlade. Because of you.”

“She wanted to kill you, Happy Roy. You should thank me.”

“You idiot!” Spittle flew from his lips. “I wanted to kill her myself. With my own two hands. Now I have to get her out of jail before I can do it. Do you have any idea what Johnny Cochrane charges an hour?”

“Whatever it is, you can afford it.”

Happy Roy’s voice cracked. “I’m practically broke. Those damn claymation commercials are costing me a fortune, and no one is buying the tie-in products. I’ve got ten thousand Happy Roy t-shirts, moldering away in a warehouse. Plus the burger chains with their processed chicken strips are forcing me into bankruptcy.”

“Those new Wendy’s strips are pretty good.”

“Shut up! Put your hands over your head. No quick moves.”

“What about you mansion? Can’t you sell that?”

“It’s a rental.”

“Really? Do you mind if I ask what you pay a month?”

“Enough! We’re going for a ride, Mr. McGlade. I’m going to take you introduce you to one of our extra large deep fryers, up close and personal.”

“You told me I could keep working with your wife.”

“I said you could work with her, not set her up!”

“Six of one, half a dozen of...”

“I’m the Chicken King, goddammit! I’m an American icon! Nobody crosses me and gets

away with it!

I'd had enough of the Chicken King's crazy ranting, so I reached for the gun. Happy Roy tried to squeeze the trigger, but I easily yanked it away before he had the chance.

"Let me give you a little lesson in firearms, Happy Roy. A COP .357 has a twenty pound trigger pull. Much too hard to fire for a guy with arthritis."

Happy Roy reached for his belt, fighting with the buckle. "You bastard! I'll beat the fear of Happy Roy into you, you son of a bitch! No one crosses..."

I tapped him on the head with his gun, and the Chicken King collapsed. After checking for a pulse, I went for the phone and dialed my Lieutenant friend.

"Hi, Jack. Me again. Marietta Garbonzo's husband just broke into my place, tried to kill me. Yeah, Happy Roy himself. No, he doesn't look so happy right now. Can you send someone by? And can you make it quick? He's bleeding all over my carpet, and I just had it cleaned. Thanks."

I hung up and stared down at the Chicken King, who was mumbling something into the carpet.

"You say something, Happy Roy?"

"I should have stayed single."

"No kidding," I said. "Relationships can be murder."

A BIT OF HALLOWEEN MAYHEM

An Andrew Mayhem Thriller by Jeff Strand

The most bizarre Halloween of my life began with me chaperoning a party at my house...one that consisted of a dozen second-grade girls. Obviously, that alone was enough to push it way over the top on the shriek-o-meter, but to my astonishment there was something even worse in store.

My daughter Theresa was seven and she'd been allowed to invite her friends over for a party, as a "safe alternative to trick-or-treating," which was the current catch phrase in our little town of Chamber, Florida. This was not my idea. I was, quite honestly, appalled that my kids would be robbed of one of the greatest joys of childhood.

When I was a kid, my friends and I took trick-or-treating with deadly seriousness. We'd start planning our route in late August, drawing an incredibly detailed scale map of the neighborhood and plotting the best course to attain the maximum candy in the minimum time. But this wasn't simple geometry...oh no, far from it. We also had to factor in the homes that were stingy with their candy, which had to be hit early, and the homes that regularly overbought, which were saved for last so we'd get them when they were desperately trying to get rid of their stash to avoid having stale Milk Duds until February.

After our parents had checked the candy for razor blades and small explosive devices, we'd each take a section of whomever's bedroom was acting as our home base that year, spread our treasures out onto the floor, and bask in the glorious wealth. Evil "muahahahahaha!" laughs were essential. And then the trading would begin, which we took far more seriously than Major League Baseball ever has. After the negotiations, which could go on for hours, we would commence with the Feast...and lo, what a feast it was!

But this year there would be no trick-or-treating for Theresa and Kyle, which meant I lost my ten percent cut for checking the candy. I'd tried desperately to convince Helen that they'd be safe under my "adult" supervision, but the neighborhood mothers had made up their mind, and it

was stupid safe alternatives for everyone. So Theresa and her friends sat in the living room accusing each other of liking certain boys, while Kyle and I hid upstairs watching *Blood, Blood, Blood!* on television.

Kyle was five and probably too young to be watching the movie, but I felt an exception could be made because a) it was Halloween, and b) Helen wasn't home. She was working at the hospital, leaving me alone to deal with the second-grade girls, who were behaving themselves surprisingly well.

"UMMMMMMMMMMM!!!" they shouted as one. "Theresa likes Eric! Theresa likes Eric!"

"Do you know this Eric guy?" I asked Kyle.

"Uh-huh."

"Does he work hard? Will he provide for your sister in the manner to which she's become accustomed?"

"He can burp songs," Kyle explained.

"Good songs?"

"I heard him do 'My Country Tis of Thee.'"

"Cool, your sister's dating a patriot," I exclaimed, nodding my approval.

"He got in trouble and the bus driver said not to do it anymore and he said if he did it again he was gonna get a misconduct slip."

"Yes, well, Abraham Lincoln's bus driver tried to give him misconduct slips, too."

The doorbell rang, and a dozen seven year-old girls shrieked in unrestrained terror. "I'd better go get that in case it's Mr. Boogedy-Bones," I told Kyle. "Do you want another Coke?"

Kyle nodded.

"And what do we tell your mother you drank tonight?"

"Milk."

"What kind of milk?"

"Skim milk."

"Good boy." I ruffled his hair just to annoy him, then hurried down the stairs and answered the door as Theresa and her friends scrambled around like electrified whackos trying to find hiding spots.

"RRRRrrraaaahhhhHHHHH!!!" said the Wolf Man.

"AAAAHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!!!" replied the second grade girls.

"Hi, Roger," I said.

My best friend Roger took off his mask, grinning. "Hiya, Andrew. I thought I'd see if you needed some moral support in your darkest hour."

"Actually, it's going pretty well. Kyle and I were upstairs watching a movie, c'mon and join us."

"Hi, Uncle Roger!" said Theresa, waving from behind her Britney Spears costume, sans breasts.

"Hi, Theresa. Have you started bobbing for apples yet?"

"We can't do that anymore. Daddy chipped his tooth last year and Kyle almost drowned."

"I told him not to inhale," I said in my own defense.

"Bunch of lightweights in this place," Roger remarked. "I hope you've at least got some decent apple cider."

"We've got pumpkin pie punch!" Theresa announced.

Roger looked at me. "Pumpkin pie punch?"

"Helen accidentally invented it last night. Don't drink any."

"I shan't."

I went to the kitchen and got three Cokes out of the refrigerator. After telling the girls to continue behaving themselves, thus fulfilling my duty as a responsible adult, Roger and I went back upstairs into my bedroom.

"Daddy, you missed a person melting," Kyle informed me.

"Did you hear that?" I asked Roger. "A human being melts and I miss it, all because of you."

"Happy Halloween, Kyle!" said Roger, putting his Wolf Man mask back on.

"RRRRRrrrrrrraaaaaarrrrrRRRRRRR!!!"

"If you're good I'll let you take Uncle Roger for a walk later," I said. "Maybe we can find him some dog biscuits."

Roger went "RrraaarRRRR" again and lumbered toward my innocent child, arms outstretched. Since the eyeholes in the mask weren't all they could be, he smacked into the bed, earning himself an explosion of laughter from Kyle.

"Not exactly Lon Chaney, Jr., are you?" I asked.

Roger pulled off his mask and rubbed his shin. "That really hurt."

"Do you need to go to the vet?"

"Ha-ha. Hey, Kyle, why don't you ask your dad where babies come from?"

"Daddy, where do—?"

"All right, all right, let's just watch the movie," I said. "There may be more meltings in store!"

After the bittersweet conclusion, where a few people died, we went back downstairs. The girls were seated in a circle, all the lights out except for a pair of flashlights, and screamed as one when we entered the living room. It took a few minutes to translate the shrieks and giggles, but we figured out that they were telling ghost stories.

"Have any of you heard about the Taywood house?" asked Roger.

A couple more minutes of screaming and giggling indicated that no, they had not. I had, and in fact was the one who told Roger about it, so I sat on the couch and waited for him to completely mess up the story.

Roger motioned for two of the girls to scoot over and make room, and then joined the circle. He took one of the flashlights and shined it up into his face, which was supposed to make him look eerie but really just made it look like he had a light-up nose. "Most ghost stories take place hundreds of years ago, but not this one," he said in a spooky voice. "The Taywood house was built a mere five years ago, by a man named Jarvis Taywood."

It was four years ago, and the man's name was Jervis, but Roger at least had the basic concept right.

"Jarvis was a crazy old man, and less than a month after he finished the house, he killed himself. Nobody knows why he did it, but he jumped into some molten plastic at a chair manufacturing company. All they ever found were his shoes, sitting by the vat of plastic, with a suicide note tucked inside. It's said that whenever you sit on a plastic chair, you may just be sitting on old Jarvis."

That statement received several squeals of delight and disgust. It was, in fact, the truth (or, more likely, just the correct version of a complete lie), though if I'd been telling the story I would've changed it to a chocolate manufacturing company, so that I could end it with "And you may have eaten him TONIGHT!"

"Anyway," Roger continued, "his family lived in the house for another year, but every once in a while they would hear weird noises. Only at night, never during the day. Creaking footsteps on the staircase. Whispering. And none of them could explain it, but the whole family felt like

Jarvis was still there, watching them. Always watching."

The girls had fallen silent. "About six months after Jarvis died, the oldest daughter couldn't take it anymore, so she ran away and was never seen again. At least...not alive. They did find her body. She'd drowned in a small pond, which at its very center wasn't even deep enough to come up to her waist. And she'd left her shoes by the edge. There was no note inside, but one can only wonder if Jarvis was somehow responsible for his daughter's death."

Dead silence. The temptation to shout "BOO!" was overwhelming, but I didn't want to ruin Roger's show.

"One night, exactly one year after Jarvis killed himself, his wife heard the soft footsteps. They were coming up the stairs. Like she always did, she pulled the blankets up over her head and waited for them to go away. They were getting closer...closer...until she heard them in her very room."

Roger's flashlight began to flicker, so he tapped it against his palm until the beam was steady again. "They stopped. She could feel something watching her. And then she heard the whisper, 'Dorothy...Dorothy...I still love you...'"

"Like in *The Wizard of Oz*?" asked Becky, one of Theresa's more annoying friends.

"No, not like in *The Wizard of Oz*," said Roger without missing a beat, "It was Dorothy Taywood, who lay on her bed, blankets above her head, listening to the ghostly voice whisper her name. The voice that sounded just like her dead husband. The whispering stopped, and finally she worked up the courage to peek over the blankets, just...a...bit..."

Roger looked at each girl in the circle in turn. "And there, standing at the foot of her bed, was her husband."

"Were his guts hanging out?" Becky inquired.

"They might have been. I wasn't there. But she squeezed her eyes shut because she was so terrified, and when she opened them again, he was gone. She immediately woke up her kids, at least those who were still alive, and they spent the rest of the night in a hotel. They never came back to the Taywood house.

"It took them a while to sell it, but finally another family moved in. They heard the same footsteps in the middle of the night. Once they even thought they heard screaming. And there were other things, too. Books would vanish and mysteriously reappear. They called the newspaper, and a couple of reporters from the Chamber Chronicle spent a week in the house, but

nothing happened during that time...at least, that's what they said. The rumors, and I believe them, are that they were just too frightened to print the truth."

I continued to withstand the "BOO!" urge, which required almost superhuman strength at this point.

"Shortly after that, in the middle of the night, the father woke up...and there was the ghost of Jarvis, standing right there in the doorway. But instead of hiding under the blankets, the father got up and went after it. He ran down the stairs, but there was no sign of the ghost...it had vanished. Vanished into the netherworld. They moved out the next day.

"They sold the Taywood house to a man who lived by himself. Six months later, he disappeared. They don't know what happened to him. They never found a note, they never found a body...but they did find his shoes, lying on the staircase. And since then, nobody has lived there. The house is empty...vacant, except for the ghost of Jarvis Taywood...silent except for his footsteps on the stairs...except for certain nights, dark nights, when the neighbors swear they can hear whispering...and screaming..."

"BOO!" I shouted.

Several of the girls shot me dirty looks. Theresa put her finger to her lips and shushed me. Ashamed, I stared at the floor and was silent.

"So remember, girls, never go near the Taywood house. Jarvis still haunts it to this day...and he might just follow you home."

"BOO!" said Kyle. The girls shrieked in terror and then burst into delighted laughter. Roger handed the flashlight back to Becky and got to his feet.

"Is that all true, Uncle Roger?" asked Theresa.

"There's only one way to find out," Roger told her.

I smacked him in the shoulder before he could pursue that line of thinking any further. But not hard enough.

* * *

A couple hours later, all of the girls had been claimed by their parents except Becky. We sat in the living room, watching *Kill Or You're Dead*, or possibly the sequel.

"I think we should go explore the Taywood house," said Roger.

"Shut up, Roger," I suggested.

"No, really! It would be fun."

"So would running through the Chamber Police Department wearing nothing but gummi worms, and yet I haven't given in to temptation."

"Where's your sense of adventure?" Roger asked.

I put my arm around Kyle. "Son, this is what's known as peer pressure. When you get older, bad kids will try to get you to smoke and use bad words and chew this nasty black goopy stuff that makes you spit, and your job is to tell them no. Got it?"

"Got it," said Kyle. He looked over at Roger. "No."

"Good boy."

Roger chuckled and sat back to watch the rest of the movie. About fifteen minutes later, Becky's mother showed up, wearing a witch costume with fluorescent warts.

"Sorry I'm late," she said. "Did you have a good time, Becky?"

Becky nodded. "Can we go to the Taywood house, Mommy?"

"You mean..." she took a moment to let out a maniacal cackle, "...the *haunted* Taywood house?"

"Yes!"

"Of course not."

Becky pointed accusingly at Roger and I. "*They're* going!"

"No, we're not," I insisted. "I fought the peer pressure. I just said no."

"No," said Kyle.

"Good boy."

"I think you two should go," said Mrs. Becky's Mother. "It would be fun. I'll watch the kids in the van while you explore."

I sighed. "Aren't we a little old for this?"

Roger gave me a condescending stare. "Aren't you the one who spent all of last Thursday night building Death Soldiers out of saltwater taffy?"

"Don't bring my Death Soldiers into this."

"C'mon, where's your Halloween spirit?"

"Kyle, tell Uncle Roger and Becky's mom what you say to peer pressure."

"Yes!" said Kyle with a huge grin.

"The child has spoken," Becky's mom announced.

* * *

And so, yes, I found myself in the van, riding toward the Taywood house, wondering how I ended up in these situations. Well, half the time it was entirely my idea, but I wondered how I ended up in these situations when Roger was the instigator.

It took about thirty minutes to get there, during which Becky told her mother the Taywood story eight different times, each less accurate than the last, until finally it involved aliens, Frankenstein's monster, and Darth Vader. Though I have to admit the part with Darth Vader was pretty cool.

From the outside, it appeared to be a perfectly normal abandoned house. The homes on each side were also for sale, and had been for quite some time from the looks of the lawns. The Taywood place was a green, two-story wooden house with a large front porch and single-car garage.

"This is really dumb," I said as Becky's mother pulled the van into the driveway. "It's also trespassing. We shouldn't be teaching our children to trespass. Kyle, I never want to see you trespass, okay?"

"Okay."

"It's not trespassing," said Becky's mom. "Nobody owns it anymore. And you're both adults. And it's Halloween."

I'm pretty sure that none of those excuses would have carried any weight with my wife (and I didn't think any of them were true except it being Halloween). But, despite my parental advice, I've always really sucked at resisting peer pressure, from tugging on the Rottweiler's tail at age four to eating the Mystery Solid last month.

"Can I come?" asked Theresa.

"No," I said.

"Can I come?" asked Becky.

"No," her mother said.

"Can I come?" asked Kyle.

"No," I said.

"Why?" asked Kyle.

"Because," I said.

"Don't worry about us," said Becky's mom (I really should have known her real name, but I wasn't about to admit my ignorance). "We'll just play some games and have fun. Tell the ghost I

said hi!"

Roger and I got out of the van with our flashlights and walked toward the house. "You're a jerk," I informed him.

"Oh, now, you're just jealous because I came up with the idea first. Remember in high school when we went looking for Bigfoot? That was fun, wasn't it?"

"It wasn't Bigfoot; it was the Loch Ness Monster. And you thought it was swimming around in the sewers, so no, I don't recall it being all that much fun. You certainly were dumb as a kid, weren't you?"

"Okay, well, I have an important question."

"What?"

"Where exactly would you wear the gummi worms? I mean, if you were running around City Hall naked you'd be way too nervous to maintain an—"

"Shut up, Roger."

We stepped up onto the front porch. I knocked on the door.

"You think the ghost is going to answer?" Roger asked.

"We don't know that nobody lives here. There could be drug dealers inside. Do you really want to walk in on some drug dealers? Drug dealers have guns, you know."

"You're right," said Roger. "Good thinking on the drug dealer situation."

No drug dealers or ghosts answered, so I tested the doorknob. Unlocked. That wasn't particularly surprising...we certainly weren't the first people to think of exploring the Taywood house, though we were probably the only ones who'd fully completed puberty.

I pushed the door open, and it let out the traditional horror movie creak. I flipped the light switch by the doorway, just in case the electric company continued to supply power out of a sense of generosity, but nothing happened. Roger and I turned on our flashlights and stepped inside.

The house was mostly barren, save for one torn couch and about eighty pounds of dust in the living room alone. The walls were also covered with graffiti that was remarkably clever despite artistic and grammar limitations.

I have to admit, though, something about the house didn't feel right. It didn't feel abandoned. I didn't believe in ghosts, but I definitely got the sense that there was some kind of presence in the house. Of course, it was probably the presence of rats.

"Well, I've explored about all I can handle for one evening," I said. "How about we head back to the van?"

Roger grinned. "Are you scared?"

"I'm scared of what Helen's gonna do to me when she finds out I dragged the kids out here, yeah!"

"The kids are safe in the van with Mrs. Glencrest. You're being a perfectly responsible, mature parent. Don't worry about it."

I almost asked how he remembered her name, but I was pretty sure the answer would only reveal my inadequate social skills. I shined my flashlight around the room. "Well, Rog, I'm seeing a lot of dust and not much else. How much more exploring do you want to do?"

"We've at least got to go upstairs. That's where the ghost of Jarvis was sighted."

"There is no ghost. And it's Jervis."

"No, it's not. Jarvis Taywood."

"No, sorry, but I'm afraid it's...oh, no, wait, you're right. My bad."

"C'mon, Andrew, you've got to admit you're having fun. We don't get out like this very often anymore. You don't want your children to think their father is a total wuss, do you?"

"Oh no, I'd much rather have them think their father is a total idiot."

We wandered into the kitchen, which still had a refrigerator and oven but no other furnishings. Roger opened the pantry door, revealing lots more dust, some cobwebs, and a few cans of various fruits and vegetables resting on the shelves.

"Canned goods from beyond the grave," Roger pointed out.

"Spooky. Let's go upstairs and get this over with."

As we walked upstairs, I had to admit to myself that exploring a dark, reportedly haunted house really was kind of fun...not that I was going to admit it to anybody else. The stairs didn't creak as we walked up them, which kind of hampered the mood, but the upstairs was plenty dust-covered and eerie.

We walked into the master bedroom, which had a bed frame but no mattress. "This is where they saw him," Roger said. "Do you feel anything...watching you?"

I shook my head. "But I feel cold...oh, so cold...ever so cold...hold me, Roger...share your manly warmth..."

"Ha ha," said Roger. Then he raised his voice. "Jarvis Taywood, if you're here, show

yourself! Reveal your spectral presence to us mere mortals! Let us gaze upon your ectoplasm from the other side!"

Nothing happened.

Roger frowned. "Well, he's just being a snot."

"Maybe you weren't loud enough."

"Yo, Jarvis Taywood!" Roger shouted. "Come on out! Here, ghostie, ghostie, ghostie! Here ghost, c'mon boy!" He let out a dog-calling whistle.

"You know, if his ghost really did haunt this place, you're screwed in the afterlife."

Suddenly Roger turned toward the doorway. "Did you hear that?"

"What?"

"Shhh!"

"Sorry."

"Shhh!"

We were both silent for a long moment. "I heard something downstairs," Roger said.

"Probably just something trying to force its way into our plane of existence. Don't worry about it."

"I don't know what it was. I'm gonna go check it out."

"All right, you go downstairs and get killed, I'll investigate up here some more. Meet you in purgatory."

"Sounds good," said Roger, leaving the bedroom and heading downstairs. I wandered around the room some more, not quite sure what I thought I was looking for, considering that we were just here on a lark. A stupid lark, at that.

I walked out of the bedroom and investigated the bathroom, which was a hotbed of non-existent paranormal activity. The other bedrooms were just as empty. Still, I couldn't deny that there was something decidedly eerie about this place. I half-expected to see the words "LEAVE OR DIE!!!" appear in blood on the wall at any moment.

I nervously turned around and glanced at the wall behind me. There were no words in blood, not even an ad.

Why was I so creeped out all of a sudden? And why wasn't I more ashamed of myself for *getting* creeped out?

"Hey, Roger!" I called out. "What'd you find?"

No response.

"Here, Roger, Roger, Roger! C'mere, boy!" I said, letting out a dog-whistle.

Still nothing.

Great. As if he hadn't regressed enough by dragging me out here in the first place, now he was playing obnoxious teenager pranks. If I walked downstairs looking for him, he'd probably leap out at me from behind that ugly couch. What a dork.

I briefly considered turning the tables on him, letting out a scream of terror and faking my own death (or something comparable). But then I figured that if he actually *had* heard a noise, it might have been Mrs. Whatever and the kids. Most likely, they were all plotting against me right now, but I didn't want to scare the kids, at least not in a fake-my-own-death kind of way.

In a moment of maturity I decided to just walk downstairs and let them jump out. No sense letting things get out of hand. I'd already put myself at more than enough risk of getting in trouble tonight.

I casually walked down the stairs, which did creak this time. "Okay, Roger, no more free Froot Loops at my place if you don't come out right now."

He didn't answer. I headed toward the sofa, keeping close to the wall so that hopefully I could see behind it before he decided to jump out at me. But he wasn't there.

I checked the dining room and kitchen, including the pantry. No sign of him.

I quickly checked the rest of the downstairs area.

Nothing.

Fine. So he left me. I opened the front door, which let out such a loud creak that I wondered if he really could have gotten out without my hearing it.

I walked outside, shutting the door behind me, and went over to the van, which I was almost surprised to find was still there. Becky's mom rolled down her window. "Have fun?"

"Oh, gobs. Did Roger come out here?"

She shook her head. "Not that I saw."

"Are you sure?"

"Positive." She certainly *looked* believable enough, but I wasn't about to discount anyone from Roger's sinister plan.

"Well, then, he's just being a doofus," I said, walking around and getting in the van. "What about you guys?" I asked, looking back at Theresa, Kyle, and Becky. "Have you seen Uncle

Roger?"

"Not me!" said Becky.

"Not me either!" said Theresa.

"I haven't! I haven't!" Kyle pitched in.

"He's not hiding in the van?" I asked them. "Maybe under your feet?"

"No way!" said Becky.

"Are you suuuuuuuuuure?"

"Yes way!"

"Seriously, Andrew," said Becky's mom, "we didn't see him come out of the house. Do you think he's okay?"

"Yeah, he's fine," I muttered. "We should just leave him here."

"Yeah, leave him! Leave him!" proclaimed Becky, while my own children giggled.

"No, no, we're not going to leave him," I said. "We'll just wait for him to come out by himself. Boy, will he feel dumb."

"Is everyone up for another game?" asked Becky's mom. At the children's vigorous assent, she began. "I spy, with my little eye..."

* * *

Ten minutes later, Roger still hadn't come out of the Taywood house, and I was concerned. Yeah, he was sometimes obnoxious, and immature, and had an almost religious dedication to being a smart-ass, but he really wasn't prone to these kinds of pranks. Even if it had only been the two of us, it would have been out of character to drag it out this long, but with the children present it was just plain mean-spirited. Sure, I was talking it up like it was a big game, but if I hadn't been doing so Theresa and Kyle would've been worried sick.

"It's Kyle's butt!" said Becky.

"That was my next guess!" Theresa insisted.

"Becky! That's not very nice! You apologize to him!" said her mother, in that Scolding Parent voice I've never quite been able to perfect.

"All right, I'm going back inside," I decided. "I'll give him one last chance to come out."

"What if he doesn't?" asked Becky's mom.

"I don't know yet. I'll be back in five minutes, tops."

I returned to the house and stepped into the living room, which was still empty. Once again I

got that creeped-out feeling, along with the already present feelings of anger and worry.

"Roger, you're taking this way too far," I announced in a loud voice. "Theresa's in the car crying. Come on out."

No response.

"If you don't come out, I'm going to have to assume that something happened to you, and I'll have to call the police. I'm pretty sure you don't want to explain to the cops that you were hiding out in an abandoned house just to play a joke on some kids. Get out here."

Still nothing.

Fine. I'd do one last quick search of the house, and then contact the police. What a lousy Halloween. No candy, no creative use of the candy after the kids were asleep, possible trespassing charges...Thanksgiving dinner with the in-laws was looking better and better.

I went back upstairs and waved my flashlight in every possible place that Roger could fit, all the while sharing a loud running commentary about what I was going to do to him when I found him, which included a list of the top five locations on his body that might serve as the flashlight's final resting place.

He wasn't anywhere upstairs. And there was simply no way he'd let the joke go on this long. Something had happened to him. It was officially time to go for help.

I went back to the staircase. As I headed downstairs, my flashlight beam shone across the face of an old man standing at the bottom of the stairs, looking up at me. I recognized the face from the newspaper photos. Jarvis Taywood.

I tried to say "What the—," "Holy—," and "AAAIIEEEEE!!!" all at the same time. It came out as an incoherent gurgle. I dropped the flashlight, which bounced down the stairs and rolled away. The figure was gone.

It took me a good fifteen seconds to realize that I needed to breathe, and another fifteen seconds after that to actually regain the ability to do so. One track of my mind kept insisting that there was a perfectly logical explanation, while another kept saying, "I do believe in spooks! I do believe in spooks! I do I do I do!"

No, I didn't. There was a perfectly logical explanation for this. Roger wearing a Jarvis Taywood mask, for example. Everything would be explained as soon as I walked down the stairs to investigate.

The dark stairs.

I walked slowly, carefully, making sure I didn't fall and kill myself, which would've been a pretty major act of party pooping if this did turn out to be a joke. I reached the bottom without any death on my part, then hurried over and retrieved the flashlight.

Then I waved the flashlight beam all over the living room, trying to catch a glimpse of Jarvis Taywood or his ghost. Nothing. Rationally, I knew that the best course of action was to rush outside and tell Becky's mom to call the police, but I also knew that Roger could be in immediate danger. I headed into the kitchen.

Nothing there, either. No place to hide except the pantry.

Inside the pantry, something fell. I let out a rather embarrassing yelp.

I held up the flashlight at a suitable angle for bashing somebody's head if the need arose, then threw open the pantry door and quickly stepped back.

It was empty. A can of spinach rolled against my feet.

Could a ghost topple spinach? Would it have any reason to?

And then, with a barely audible creak, the inside wall of the pantry slowly began to swing open, like a door.

I pulled it open all the way, revealing another room slightly smaller than the pantry, containing nothing but a ladder leading down into a hole in the dirt floor.

"Whoa," was the best I could think to whisper to myself, and I'm pretty sure I didn't even pronounce it correctly.

This was definitely the time to call the police.

Roger screamed from down below.

There was definitely not time to call the police.

I peered down into the hole, but while there was a definite flickering below, I couldn't see anything else. I didn't dare shine my flashlight down there, or even climb down the ladder, not if I wanted to take the old man by surprise. Instead I turned around, praying that this meant I'd be facing the right direction when I landed, stepped backward, and dropped down into the darkness.

I wasn't sure how far I fell. It was far enough that I dropped to my knees with a jolt of pain, but not far enough to shatter any bones.

When I looked up, the first thing that caught my attention was the old man rushing at me with a meat cleaver.

I jumped to my feet and swung the flashlight, bashing him across the face. The old man was

knocked to the side, the weapon still in his grasp. He struck the wall and began stumbling back toward me, so I gave him another solid bash with the flashlight and he hit the floor. He didn't move.

We were in what looked exactly like a mobile home with reinforced walls. It probably *was* a mobile home with reinforced walls. There was a large shelf of canned goods, as well as a shelf of books. The place was lit by a couple of candles and a kerosene lamp.

Roger lay on a bed, his arms over his head and his wrists handcuffed to the metal bedposts. "The guy's crazy!" he shrieked. "He's a total lunatic! A total complete lunatic! Crazy! I'm not kidding, he's crazy! Oh my *God* he's crazy!"

"I sort of got that from the meat cleaver," I said, walking over to the bed. "Do you know where the keys to the handcuffs are?"

"They're in his pocket! He's crazy! He was going to eat me!"

I frowned. "He was going to *eat* you?"

"Yes! He was going to eat my freakin' leg! Have you ever had some crazy guy say he's gonna eat your leg? It's disturbing! It's really disturbing!"

So in the course of about a minute I'd gone from exploring a haunted house to dealing with a meat-cleaver wielding cannibal. Life is quaint sometimes.

"Just calm down," I said. "I'm not going to let him eat your leg. I'm going to go over there, get the keys, set you free, and then we'll go back upstairs where nobody ever gets eaten."

"Are you sure he's unconscious?"

"No. That's why I'm going to drop a can of..." I picked a can off the shelf, "...yams on his head."

"Maybe a book would work better," Roger suggested.

I looked over at the other wall. "They're all paperback."

"No, I saw a hardcover one."

I surveyed the bookshelf, and there was indeed a thick hardcover novel. I pulled it off the shelf. "*The Stand*! Perfect! He'll be out for hours!"

"Maybe you should drop the can of yams too, just to be sure," said Roger.

"Good thinking."

I turned around and saw that while I'd been trying to find a suitable object for dropping on his head, the old man had recovered and was sitting against the wall, meat cleaver balanced on

his knees. "I'm sorry," he said, giving us a sheepish smile.

I really wasn't sure what to say to that. "I'm, uh...sorry, too."

The old man nodded as if my apology were acceptable. "I'm Jervis Taywood."

"It's *Jervis*! I knew it!"

"I knew I was going to be discovered sooner or later," said Jervis. "But I just couldn't do it. I couldn't stay below all the time. Sometimes you've got to get up and wander around the house, you know?"

"Absolutely," I agreed.

"I felt horrible abandoning my family and all, but these...these *rages*...I got to the point where I couldn't control them."

"So these are like, drag people to your underground lair and threaten to eat their leg kinds of rages?" I asked.

Jervis nodded. "Yes, basically." He glanced over at Roger. "I wouldn't really have eaten your leg. I may have scooped out a forkful, but it never would have made it to my mouth."

"Shut up you crazy lunatic son of a—!"

"Chill, Roger," I said, setting a reassuring hand on his leg, which was probably not the best location for a reassuring hand at that particular time and which elicited a shriek of horror.

"I don't know what sparked the rage tonight," Jervis said. "Okay, well, I do. It was that whole 'ghostie ghostie ghostie' thing and that annoying whistling. It just set me off. But I never meant to grab your friend and drop him down here. I guess I wasn't expecting to see him standing right there when I opened the pantry door."

"I can understand that," I said. "It's not the best sight in the world. So you faked your death and went to live down here, huh?"

"I didn't fake my death. I just disappeared."

"What about jumping into the vat of molten plastic?"

"Who said I did that?"

"I heard it...uh, I dunno, *somewhere*..."

"Did you hear it from the legitimate news media?"

"No, probably not," I admitted.

"That's a pretty dumb way to commit suicide, don't you think?"

"Yes, probably."

"Just how old are you?"

"All right, knock it off," I said. "I don't need to be lectured by somebody who goes into cannibalistic rages."

We sat in silence for a long moment.

"So what now?" asked Jervis.

"I'm not quite sure," I said.

We sat in silence for another long moment.

"I guess we leave," I decided.

"That works for me," said Jervis. He removed a small pair of keys from his pocket and tossed them to me. "Sorry about the handcuffs. They're meant for me. You know, when I get those rage things."

I unlocked the cuffs. Roger immediately sat up and began vigorously rubbing his wrists, trying to restore circulation.

"Don't worry," said Jervis. "I'll try to do better in the future. You're not going to tell anybody about me, are you?"

"No, your secret is safe with us," I said.

"This is the police!" a voice shouted from above. "If anyone is down there, make yourselves known!"

Jervis shrugged. "I'll get psychiatric help rather than jail, right?"

"Yeah, I think that's probably a safe bet."

"Okay. Could you guys maybe, you know, go up there and kind of plead my case before they come down here? Maybe not your friend so much," he said, looking at me, "but you seem nice enough."

"Sure," I said. "Come on, Roger."

We walked over to the ladder. "We'll be right up!" I announced.

* * *

Jervis was gone when the officers went down the ladder.

My first thought: "Oh my God, he *was* a ghost after all!"

My second thought: "Check the closet, moron."

They did. And the fake back wall revealed a small tunnel, which eventually emerged into the pantry of the "abandoned" house next door.

The police never did find him.

And yes, I got in a *lot* of trouble when Helen came home.

So to close, I just want to say that if you hear eerie sounds in your house at night, and you have a pantry, and your home was built under circumstances that would have enabled it to be constructed over a buried mobile home, you can never be too careful...

Oh, and on one final Halloween-related note, who in the world decided that those piddly little miniature candy bars should be called "Fun Size?" That's not fun size! Fun size would be a block of chocolate the size of a woolly mammoth!

Thank you for your attention.

THE NECRO FILE

A Harry McGlade Mystery by JA Konrath

Chapter 1

“It’s my husband, Mr. McGlade. He thinks he can raise the dead.”

The woman sitting in front of my desk was named Norma Cauldridge. She had the figure of a Barlett pear and so many freckles that she was more beige than Caucasian. She also came equipped with a severe overbite, a lazy eye, and a mole on her cheek. Not a Cindy Crawford type of mole, either. This one looked like she glued the end of a hotdog to her face. A hairy hotdog.

Plus, she smelled like sweaty feet.

Any man married to her would certainly have to raise the dead every time she wanted sex. But I didn’t become a private investigator to meet femme fatales. Well, actually I did. But mostly I did it for the money. And hers was green just like anyone else’s.

I took a can of Lysol aerosol deodorizer from my desk and gave the air a spritz. Now it smelled like sweaty feet and pine trees. With a hint of lavender.

“I get four hundred a day, plus expenses,” I told her.

I put away the air freshener and tried to sneak a look behind her large round Charlie Brownish head. When she walked into my office a minute ago, I’d been watching the National Cheerleading Finals on cable. The TV was still on, but I had muted the sound to be polite.

“I didn’t tell you what I want you to do yet.”

She was a whiner too. Nasally and high-pitched. It’s like God took a dare to make the most unattractive woman possible.

“You want me to take pictures of him acting crazy, so you can use them in the divorce.”

On television a group of nubile young twenty-somethings did synchronized cartwheels and landed in splits. I love cable.

“How did you know?” Norma asked.

I glanced at Norma. The only splits she ever did were banana.

“It’s my job to know, ma’am. I’ll need your address, his place of work, and the first three days’ pay in advance.”

Norma’s face pinched.

“I still love him, Mr. McGlade. But he’s not the same man I married. He’s...obsessed.”

Her shoulders slumped, and the tears came. I nudged over the box of Kleenex I kept on the desk for when I surfed certain internet sites.

“It’s not your fault, Mrs. Drawbridge.”

“Cauldridge.”

“A man is talking, sweetie. Don’t interrupt.”

“Sorry.”

“The fact is, Nora, some men aren’t meant to marry. They feel trapped, tied down, so they seek out different venues.”

She sniffled. “Necromancy?”

“I’ve seen all sorts of perversions in my business. One day he’s a good husband. The next day, he’s a card-carrying necrosexual. Happens all the time.”

More tears. I made a mental note to look up “necromancy” in the dictionary. Then I made another mental note to buy a dictionary. Then I made a third mental note to buy a pencil, because I always forgot my mental notes. Then I watched the cheerleaders do high kicks.

When Norma finally calmed down, she asked, “Do you take Visa?”

I nodded, wondering if I could buy used cheerleading floormats on eBay. Preferably ones with stains.

Chapter 2

Ebay didn’t have any.

Instead I bid on a set of used pom-pons and a coach’s whistle. I also bid on some old Doobie Brothers records. That led to placing a bid on a record player, since mine was busted. Then I bid on a carton of copier toner, because it was so cheap, and then I had to bid on a copier because I didn’t have one. But after thinking about it a bit, I realized I didn’t really need a copier, and those Doobie Brothers albums were probably available on CD for less than the cost of a record player.

I tried to cancel my bids, but those eBay jerks wouldn’t let me. The jerks.

I buried my anger in online pornography. Three minutes later, I headed out the door, slightly

winded and ready to get some work done.

Chapter 3

This chapter is even shorter than the last one.

Chapter 4

George Drawbridge worked as a teller for Oak Tree Bank. At a branch office. It was only three o'clock, and his wife told me he normally stayed until five, so I had plenty of time to grab a few beers first. Chicago is famous for its stuffed crust pizza, and I indulged in a small pie at a nearby joint and entertained myself by asking everyone who worked there if they made a lot of dough.

An hour later, after they asked me to leave, I sat on the sidewalk across the street from the bank, hiding in plain sight by pretending I was homeless. This involved untucking my shirt and pockets, messing up my hair, and holding up a sign that said "*I'm homeless*" written on the back of the pizza box.

Other possibilities had been, "*Will do your taxes for food*" and "*I'm just plain lazy*" and my favorite "*this is a piece of cardboard.*" But I went with brevity because I still didn't have a pencil and had to write it in sauce.

I sat there for a little over an hour before George Drawbridge appeared.

He looked like the picture his wife gave me, which wasn't a surprise because it was a picture of him. Balding, thin, pinkish complexion, with a nose so big it probably caused back problems. After exiting the bank he immediately went right, moving like he was in a huge hurry. I almost lost him, because it took over a minute to pick up the eighty-nine cents people had thrown onto the sidewalk next to me. But I managed to catch up just as he boarded a northbound bus to Wrigleyville.

Unfortunately, the only seat left on the bus was next to George. So that's where I parked my butt, because I sure as hell wasn't going to stand if I didn't have to.

I gave him a small nod as I sat down.

"I'm not following you," I told him.

George didn't answer. He didn't even look at me. His eyes were distant, out there. And up close I noticed his rosy skin tone wasn't natural—he was sunburned. Only on the left side of his

face too, like Richard Dreyfuss in that Spielberg movie about aliens. The one where he got sunburned on only the left side of his face. I think it was *Star Wars*.

Unlike his wife, George didn't smell like sweaty feet. He smelled more like ham. Honey baked ham. So much so that I wondered if he had any ham on him. I've been known to stuff my pockets with ham whenever I visited an all-you-can-eat buffet. After all, ham is pricey.

I restrained myself from asking if he indeed had any pocket ham, but couldn't help humming the Elton John song "*Rocketman*" and changing the lyrics in my head.

"Pocket ham... And I think I'm gonna eat a long, long time..."

I didn't know the rest of the song, so I kept think-singing that line over and over. After a few stops George stood up and left the bus. I followed him, keeping my distance so I didn't make him nervous. But after walking for a block I realized I could stand on the guy's shoulders and piss on his head and he still wouldn't notice me. George Drawbridge was seriously preoccupied.

We went into an Ace Hardware Store, and George bought twenty feet of nylon clothesline. He also bought something called a magnetron. I knew that there was something I needed to buy, but I couldn't remember what it was, and I hadn't written it down because I needed to buy a pencil. So I got one of those super large cans of mega energy drink. It contained three times the recommended daily allowance of taurine, whatever the hell taurine was.

After the hardware store it was back to the bus stop. We were the only two people there. George didn't pay any attention to me, but I was worried all of this close contact might get him a little suspicious. So I made sure I stood behind him, where he couldn't see me. Then I popped open my mega can and took a sip.

The flavor on the can said "Super Berry Mix." The berries must have been mixed with battery acid and diarrhea juice, but with a slightly worse taste. It burned my nose drinking it, to the point where I may have lost some nostril hair. Plus it was a shade of blue only found in nature as part of neon beer signs. I could barely choke down the last forty-six ounces.

The bus came. Again, the only seat available was next to George. I took it, and pulled my shirt up over my mouth and nose to disguise myself.

"Goddamn germs on public transportation," I said, loud enough for most of the bus to hear. This provided a clever reason for my conspicuous face-hiding behavior. I said it seven more times, just to be sure.

We took the bus to Jefferson Park, a northwest side neighborhood named after that famous

politico, Thomas Park. George exited on Foster. I followed, tailing him up Pulaski and into the Montrose Cemetery, my mind racing like a race car on a race track, driven by a race car driver, named Race.

I never liked cemeteries. Not because I'm afraid of ghosts, even though when I was a child all the kids used to tease me because they thought I was. They would dress up like ghosts and try to scare me by visiting my house at night and threatening to hang us all because my family didn't go to church. They usually left after burning a cross on our lawn. Damn ghosts.

No, I hated graveyards for much more realistic reasons. When a person died they shouldn't be kept around, like leftovers. People had a freshness date. Death meant *discard*, not preserve in a box. What ghoul thought that one up? Fifty thousand years ago, did some caveman plant Grandma in the ground hoping to grow a Grandma Tree? What fruit did *that* bear? Saggy wrinkly breasts that hung to the ground and smelled like Ben Gay and pee-pee? And what's with neckties? Why are men forced to wear a strip of cloth around their necks good for absolutely nothing except getting caught in things like doors and soup?

As my computer-like mind pondered these imponderables, George cleverly gave me the slip by walking someplace I could no longer see him. That left me with three options.

1. Wait at the entrance for him to come out.

2. Search for him.

3. Drain the lizard. Those eighty ounces of Super Berry Taurine had expanded my bladder to the size of a morbidly obese child, named Race.

I opted for number 3, and chose *Mary Agnes Morrison, Loving Wife and Mother*, to sprinkle. Maybe the taurine would liven up her eternity.

I soaked her pretty good, and had enough left over for the rest of the Morrison family, including the *Loving Husband and Father*, the *Beloved Uncle*, and the *Slutty Skank Daughter*.

I made that last tombstone up, but it would sure be cool if it was real, wouldn't it? And wouldn't it be cool if someone made a flying car? One that gave you head while you drove? I'd buy one.

I shook twice, corralled the one-eyed stallion, and began to look for George. An autumn breeze cooled the sweat on my face, neck, ears, hair, armpits, back, legs, and hands, which made me aware that I was sweating. I put a hand to my heart and discovered it was beating faster than Joe Pesci in a Scorsese flick. Because he beats people in those flicks. Beats them fast.

Why was I so edgy? Had my subconscious tapped into some sort of collective, primal fear? Did my distant ancestors, with their reptile brains and their bronze weapons made of stone, leave some sort of genetic marker in my DNA that made me sensitive to lurking danger?

I did a 360, looking for pointy-headed ghosts with gas cans. All I saw were tombstones, stretching on for as far as I could see. Hundreds. Thousands. Maybe even billions.

“Easy, McGlade. Nothing to be afraid of. It’s not like you desecrated their graves or anything.”

Noise, to my left. I had my Magnum in my hand so fast that it probably looked like it magically appeared there to anyone watching, even though I didn’t think anyone was watching.

Anyone *alive*.

My eyes drifted up an old, scary-looking tree, which had branches that looked like scary branch-shaped fingers, but with six fingers instead of the usual five, which made it even scarier. The sun was going down behind the tree, silhouetting some sort of nest-shaped mass on an extended limb that I guessed was a nest.

“Chirp,” went the nest.

My first shot blew the nest in half, and two more severed the branch from the tree.

“Dammit, McGlade. Stay cool. You just assassinated a bird.”

Which saddened me greatly. Magnum rounds were a buck-fifty each. Plus, I didn’t have any extras on me. I needed to stay cool.

“Chirp,” went the nest.

BLAM! BLAM!

By heroic effort I didn’t shoot the nest a sixth time, instead walking briskly in the opposite direction. I was in a state that might be called “hyper-awareness,” which was a lot like being the lone antelope at the watering hole. I could feel the stares of flying insects, and hear the grass growing. It was freaking me out a little bit, so I began to run, tripping over something on the ground, skidding face-first against a tombstone. A damp tombstone.

Mary Agnes Morrison.

I scurried away, palms and knees wet, and saw the bright red object that caused me to fall. The empty can of Super Berry Mix energy drink.

So my paranoia wasn’t really paranoia after all. It was just an unhealthy amount of caffeine in my veins. Which would have been kind of funny if I wasn’t soaked with my own piss. Along

with the taurine, the drink apparently contained a full day's supply of irony.

I stood up and shook out my pants legs.

“Get a grip, McGlade. And stop talking to yourself. You always know what you're going to say anyway.”

I took three or ten deep breaths, holstered my weapon, and then set out looking for George.

I had no idea that in just two minutes I was going to die.

Chapter 5

I didn't actually die. I'm lying to make the story more exciting, because this part is sort of slow.

It starts to pick up in Chapter 8. Trust me, it's worth the wait. There's sodomy.

Chapter 6

It was a fruitless search, but that didn't matter—I wasn't looking for fruit. After a few minutes, I'd found him. He'd given me the slip by cleverly disguising himself as a group of three bawling women. Closer inspection, and some grab ass, revealed they really were women after all. I did my “pretend to be blind and deaf” act and stumbled away before any of them called the police or their lawyers.

Luckily, I caught sight of an undisguised George heading into the mausoleum. I never liked mausoleums. Burying the dead was bad enough. Putting them in the walls was just begging for mice to move in. And not the kind of mice who wear red pants and open up amusement parks. I'm talking about dirty, vicious, baby-face-eating mice, the size of rats.

Actually, I'm talking about rats.

Speaking of non-sequiturs, I really needed to take another leak. The mausoleum was decent-sized, with a few hundred vaults stacked four high. Well lit, temperature controlled, silk plants next to marble benches every twenty feet. It was the kind of place that would have a bathroom, I thought, while pissing on one of the silk plants. The pot it was in wasn't any realer than the plant, because all of my piss leaked out the bottom. I stepped over the puddle and commenced the search.

One of the techniques they teach you in private eye school is how to conduct a search, I bet. I have no idea, because I didn't go to private eye school. I wasn't even sure that private eye

school actually existed. But it did in my fantasies. All the teachers were naked women, and wrong answers were punished with spankings. And the water fountains were actually beer fountains. If they had a school like that, I'd go for sure.

George wasn't down the first aisle. He wasn't down the second aisle either. Or the first aisle, which I checked again because I got confused.

"You do this?"

I spun around, wondering who spoke. It was some little old caretaker guy, clutching a mop. He pointed at the puddle on the floor.

"It was that other guy," I said, thinking fast. "You see him anywhere?"

"I only seen you, buddy. Did you go to the bathroom on my floor? There's a bathroom right there behind you. What kind of man does a thing like this?"

"That's what happens when you don't go to college."

"You piss on the floor?"

"You get a job cleaning up piss on the floor."

I left the guy to his menial labor and peeked down the second aisle again. Still no George. That led me down the third aisle, and I caught a glimpse of George crawling into a hole in the wall.

Closer inspection revealed it wasn't a hole. It was a vault. He'd crawled into someone's open tomb. I didn't even want to think why he'd do that, but my mind thought of it anyway, and then started thinking of it in enough detail that made me nauseous, yet oddly disgusted. Maybe a necromancer was someone who got his freak on with corpses. It was certainly a cheap date—only a few bucks for Lysol and Vaseline—and unless your game was really weak you'd pretty much always score. Still, I liked my women partially awake, and aware enough to be able to fight me off and tell me no. Because *no* means try harder.

I crouched down, peering into the blackness, and saw nothing but the aforementioned blackness. I fished out my keys, which had a mini flashlight attached to the ring, and illuminated the situation.

This wasn't a grave after all. In the hole was a slide, like you'd find in a children's playground, if the playground was in a mausoleum, and the children were all dead. Probably wouldn't be a lot of kids begging to go to a park like that. Not the dead ones, anyway.

I gritted my teeth. There was only one way to find out where this slide went.

“Hey, old caretaker guy!” I yelled. “Where does this slide go?”

“Go to hell!”

“I told you, it wasn’t me. I had asparagus on my pizza. Does it smell like asparagus?”

“Go to hell!”

I rubbed my chin. Maybe old caretaker guy was trying to tell me that this slide went straight to hell. I didn’t really believe him. First of all, I didn’t see any flames, and there wasn’t any smoke or brimstone or screams of the damned. Second, hell doesn’t really exist. It’s a fairy tale taught by parents to make their kids behave. Like Santa Claus. And the death penalty.

Still, going down a pitch black slide in a mausoleum wasn’t on my list of things to do before I died. My list was mostly centered around Angelina Jolie.

“This *does* smell like asparagus, you bastard!”

A glanced over my shoulder. Old caretaker guy was hobbling toward me, his drippy asparagus mop raised back like a baseball bat—a stinky, wet baseball bat that you wouldn’t want to use in a baseball game, because you wouldn’t get any hits, and because it was soaked with urine and stinked.

I decided, then and there, I wasn’t going to play ball with old caretaker guy. Which left me no choice. I took a deep breath and dove face-first down the slide.

Chapter 7

When I was ten years old, my strange uncle who lived in the country took me into his barn and showed me a strange game called *milk the cow*. The game involved a strong grip, and used a combination of squeezing and stroking until the milk came. I remember it was weird, and hurt my arm, but kind of fun nonetheless.

Afterward, we fed the cow some hay and used the fresh milk to make pancakes. When we finished breakfast, we watched a little television. It was a portable, with a tiny ten-inch screen.

Many years later, my strange uncle got arrested, for tax evasion. So I have no idea why I’m bringing any of this up.

The slide was a straight-shot down, no twists or curve. The dive jostled my grip and my key light winked out, shrouding me in darkness, like a shroud. I had no idea how fast I was going or how far I traveled. Time lost all meaning, but time really didn’t matter much anyway since I’d bought a TiVo. Minutes blurred into weeks, which blurred into seconds, which blurred into more

seconds. When I finally reached the bottom, I tucked and rolled and athletically sprang to my butt, one hand somewhere near my holster, the other cupped around my boys to protect them, not to fondle them, even though that's what it might have looked like.

I listened, my highly attuned sense of hearing sensing a whimpering sound very near, which I will die before admitting came from me, even though it did.

I'd landed on my keys. Hard.

When I stood, they remained stuck in me, hanging from my inner left cheek like I'd been stabbed by some ass-stabbing key maniac. I bit my lower lip, reached back, and tugged them out, which made the whimpering sound get louder. It hurt so bad I didn't even find it amusing that I now had a second hole in my ass, and perhaps could even perform carnival tricks, like pooping the letter X. That's a carnival I'd pay extra to see.

I found the key light and flashed the beam around, reorienting my orientation. I was in some sort of secret lower level beneath the mausoleum. Dirt walls, with wooden beams holding up the ceiling, coal mine style. To my left, a large wooden crate with the cryptic words TAKE ONE painted on the side. I refused. Why did I need a large wooden crate?

Noise, from behind. I spun around, reaching for my gun, and a dark shape tumbled off the slide, ramming into me and causing my keys to go flying, blanketing me in a blanket of darkness.

The ensuing struggle was viscous and deadly, but my years of mastering Drunken Jeet Kune Do Fu from watching old Chinese karate movies paid off. Just as I was about to deliver the Mad Crazy Hamster Fist killing blow, my attacker got some sort of weapon between us and smacked me in the face. The blow staggered me, and I reached up and felt the extensive damage, my whole head bathed in warm, sticky liquid that smelled a lot like asparagus.

Then a light blinded me. A real flashlight, not the dinky one I had on my keys. I squinted against the glare, and saw him. Old caretaker guy. A light in one hand. His mop in the other.

I spat, then spat again. My mouth had been open when he hit me.

"I'm a private detective. My name is McGlade. I'm on a case."

"Does your case involve pissing on my floor?"

I spat again. I could taste the asparagus. And the piss. It tasted like I always guessed piss would taste like. Pissy.

"Listen, buddy, you're violating federal marshal law by interfering with my investigation. Climb back up the slide and go call 911. Tell them there's a 10-69 in progress, with, uh, malice

aforethought and misdemeanor prejudicial something, rampart.”

My knowledge of cop lingo didn’t galvanize him into action.

“Climb up the slide? How?”

“Hands and knees, old man.”

“I’ll get all dirty.”

“You’re a janitor.”

“I’m a caretaker.”

“You clean up in a cemetery. Dirt shouldn’t bother you.”

The flashlight moved off of my face and swept the area.

“What is this place? Some sort of secret lower level under the mausoleum?”

I spat again. “No duh.”

“Look, there’s a crate.”

Old caretaker guy waddled over to the wooden TAKE ONE box, opened the top, and pulled out a brown robe.

“I guess we’re supposed to take the robes.”

“Obviously.”

I walked over, grabbing a robe for myself. It was made out of felt, and had a large hood. A monk’s robe. Or rather, a store-bought Halloween monk’s costume.

Old caretaker guy put his on, and as he was tugging it over his head I gave him a Crazy Hamster Elbow to the chin. He went down, hopefully in need of some facial reconstructive surgery. I scooped up his flashlight, located my keys, and limped down the tunnel.

I followed the path a few dozen yards into the darkness, ducking overhead beams when they appeared overhead, keeping an eye peeled for rats, and giant spiders, and that guy I was supposed to be following, I think his name was Fred or George or something common and only one syllable. Maybe Tom. Yeah, Tom.

No, it was Fred.

The air down here was cool and heavy and smelled like asparagus piss, but for the most part it was clean. That meant ventilation, either in the form of an exit, or an air osmosis recirculator, and I’m pretty sure that osmosis thing didn’t exist because I just made it up.

The tunnel ended at a large metal door, the kind with a slot at eye-level that opened up so some moron could ask you for a password. Which is exactly what happened. The slot opened,

and a pair of eyes stared out at me, and whoever belonged to those eyes asked for a password.

“Tom sent me,” I said.

“That’s not the password.”

“Tom didn’t say there was a password.”

“Tom who?”

“Tom,” I improvised, “from Accounting.”

“How is Tom?”

“Good. Just got over a cold, still kind of congested.”

“It’s great you know Tom, but I’m not supposed to let you in without a password.”

I was tempted to give him a Three Stooges eye poke through the slot.

“Look,” I reasoned, “why else would I be down here?”

“I have no idea. Maybe you got lost.”

“I’m wearing the robe.” I did a little sashay to emphasize the fact.

“Maybe you’re a cop.”

“I’m not a cop.”

“How do I know that?”

“Because I don’t have a badge. You want to frisk me to check?”

“No. You smell like pee-pee.”

I set my jaw. “Doesn’t anyone ever forget the password?”

The eyes shrugged. “Sure. Happens all the time.”

“So what happens then?”

“I ask them for the back-up password.”

I drew my Magnum, jammed it in the slot.

“Is the back-up password *open the fucking door or I’ll blow your head off?*”

“Yep that’s the password.”

He opened the door. I considered smacking password boy in the head, and it seemed like a good idea, so I gave him a little love tap with the butt of my pistol. When he fell over, I gave him another little love tap in the stomach, with my foot. This made my ass hurt even more, so I kicked him again, which hurt even more, so I kicked him again for causing me pain, and again, and again until the pain got so bad I had to stop, but I didn’t, I kicked him once more.

Then I wandered through a short hallway and into a large open area, roughly the size of

a woman's basketball court, which is the same size as a men's basketball court, but a woman's court has bouncing boobs. I noticed little details like that. Unfortunately, this room didn't have bouncing boobs. It had a dozen-plus boneheads in robes, all carrying flashlights, standing around and chanting something monkish.

I wormed my way into the group and considered the camera in my pocket. Mrs. Drawbridge had hired me to take pictures of her husband acting nutty. This qualified, but it was too dark to make out any details, and a flash might cause attention. Plus, these jamokes all had their hoods on, making positive ID pretty impossible.

I scanned the room, seeing if I could find Tom. I spotted him through my clever detective technique of looking around, and noticed his bag from the hardware store, still clenched in his hand. Maybe I could get up close, shove the camera in his face, get a quick snapshot, then run away.

"Attention, everyone!"

The chanting stopped. One of the wannabe monks had his hands up over his head, his knuckles brushing the dirt ceiling. Everyone stared at him.

"Let us form the sacred pentagon, and pray to Anubis, god of the dead, to bless the ceremony this evening. All hail, Anubis!"

"All hail, Anubis!" the monks chanted in reply.

Then we all arranged ourselves in a five-sided square around something in the center of the room. As I probably should have guessed—but didn't because I was too busy rubbing my painful throbbing ass—in the center of the room was a coffin.

The head monk shouted, "Who shall be the first to partake in the carnal pleasures of beyond the grave?"

I looked around, wondering what idiot would be stupid enough to bone a corpse, then found myself shoved into the center of the circle.

"My friend will go!"

I spun around, aiming the flashlight. It was old caretaker guy, a big grin creasing his face.

"This first has been chosen!" head monk bellowed. Two other monks—big ones—grabbed my arms and escorted me to the coffin.

"Guys, I'm new here. I'd sort of prefer to wait until next time before violating any dead people."

I tried to pull away, but these monks had supernatural strength. The weight of the situation began to weigh on me. Sex with a cadaver wasn't on the list of things I wanted to do before I died, unless the cadaver was Angelina Jolie.

Then I stopped struggling, because I realized this had to be some kind of joke. Like a hazing prank, and when the coffin opened a stripper would pop out and blow me. That made a lot more sense than a society of necrophiliacs meeting secretly under one of Chicago's largest cemeteries. Right?

I smiled, hoping the stripper had big tits, not even protesting when I was depantsed by one of the hulky monk guys. They also took my gun. I figured that was okay—I only needed one type of gun to handle a hot stripper. You know what I mean.

My penis. I'm talking about my penis.

"Okay." I clapped my hands together. "Let's do this."

Another monk opened the coffin, and I stared in grinning expectation at a naked dead man.

"That's a guy," I said.

Head monk came in close and whispered. "Couldn't find girl this time. It doesn't matter. Death is death. It's all a turn-on. You're here to get laid, right?"

I eyed the body. A chubby bald white guy, late fifties. The Y cut across his chest indicated he was autopsied. Death was probably a heart attack, based on the size of his gut.

"I'm actually not really feeling it right now," I said.

"We can flip him over, if that helps."

"I don't think it will help."

"How fresh is it?" someone in the crowd yelled.

"Planted eight days ago," head monk answered.

The crowd cheered.

"I got sloppy seconds!"

"I got thirds!"

"I want to go last, when he's so full he's leaking out of his nose!"

I tried to step away, but the inhumanly muscular monks held me firm.

"I'm really not horny right now," I insisted. "In fact, I may never be horny again."

"My friend is shy!" That damn old caretaker guy again. "He doesn't like to pitch! He prefers catching!"

“No problem. Fetch the bicycle pump!”

Someone brought over a bike pump, complete with needle tip. The head monk fussed around with the poor dead guy’s junk, then pushed the needle into the pee hole at the shriveled tip. I had an anti-erection, my dick actually retreating into my body as I watched.

He began to pump. And, incredibly, the corpse’s johnson responded by filling out in length and width, until it stuck up like a tent pole. The monk kept pumping, and then the scrotum inflated. First apple-sized. Then grapefruit. Then soccer ball. I winced, waiting for the *POP*, but he quit before it got to medicine ball proportions. Which is a good thing, because balls that big would be bad medicine indeed.

“This is wrong on so many levels,” I said.

Someone stuck a tube of KY into my hand, the head monk said, “Have fun,” and then I was tossed onto the corpse, the coffin lid slamming closed above me with devastating finality.

Chapter 8

I lied. There isn’t any sodomy in this chapter. Instead, there was a good minute of mindless screaming panic, followed by a minute of mindless yelling terror, and another two minutes of unmanly begging.

“We’re not opening up until you finish,” head monk spoke through the coffin lid.

“I’m finished.” I hoped I sounded sincere. “It was fantastic. Best dead sex I ever had.”

He wasn’t buying. “The only way you’re getting out of there is by embracing your necrophilia. That’s why you came, isn’t it? That’s why we’re all here. To make our fantasies come true. To taste the forbidden.”

“I tasted it. It’s like rotten meat, and disappointingly unresponsive.”

“We can stay here all night if we have to.”

I collected my thoughts, the sum total of which were *Get me the fuck out of here*. Then I calmed down a little. Then I started screaming again. Then calm. Then more screaming. Then even more screaming.

Finally, I took a deep breath, and really started screaming.

Being hysterical is pretty exhausting, so I took a time-out and tried to rationalize what to do next, other than scream.

Unfortunately, clearing my head made me even more aware of my current situation, and

how disgustingly horrible it was. I was trapped in a coffin, lying on top of a naked dead guy with nuts the size of a basketball. A curly-haired basketball with a bratwurst glued onto the top. It pressed against my pelvis in a way that could only be described as awful.

My upper half wasn't any happier, with my face inches away from a dead man's. He didn't really smell like rotting meat. Not exactly. It was more like meat that was about to go bad, but dunked in formaldehyde first. His flesh was waxy, sort of stiff, and cold in a way that only dead people get. I moved my hands up across his nude, hairy chest, fighting the urge to vomit, and then pressed my elbows into his gut to force some distance between us.

It was a mistake. His autopsy meant his ribs had been cut away, and no ribs meant no internal support. My elbows ripped through the stitches and my arms disappeared into his still-moist body cavity.

I felt things. Horrible things. Squishy things. To prevent the organs from leaking, the clever embalmer had placed them in plastic bags, like some sort of lunch snacks from hell. I thanked the darkness that it was dark and I couldn't see anything, because I had no light. But I screamed anyway.

When the screaming finally stopped, I screamed a little more, and then realized the only way I was going to get out of here is to do what women have been probably doing with me ever since I'd been sexually active.

I'd have to fake it.

Unfortunately, the only way to fake a sexual movement is to perform a sexual movement. So I locked my knees on either side of his hips, his giant scrotum tucked beneath my legs like a fleshy bicycle seat, and began the humping motion. I also began to cry.

The coffin went with the rhythm, back and forth and back and forth, and it was a high end model which meant springs in the cushion which meant this felt even more like the real thing. Even though I couldn't see I squeezed my eyes shut and invented gods in my imagination so I could pray to them to make this end. I tried to think back on happy times, but too many of my happy times involved sex and that didn't help me block out the unhappy fact that I was fake dry-humping a corpse. I tried thinking about happy times when I was a kid, and unwillingly focused on the time I was six years old and my mother bought me a Hoppity Horse for my birthday, and how I used to love bouncing up and down the neighborhood and, oh goddamn it...

I threw up in my mouth. Energy drink and pizza mixed with stomach acid. I swallowed it

because adding puke to this situation was possibly the only thing that could make it worse.

Scratch that last thought. My pelvic gyrations had loosened up some trapped air in the nether regions of the cadaver, prompting extreme flatulence. He ripped one so loud it sounded like a trumpet. But is sure as hell didn't smell like one. You think you know stink? Dead guy farts are number one on the stinkmeter. It was so bad, I'm sure if I could see I would have seen green gas.

"Do it! Give it to him!"

I wasn't sure who the head monk was cheering on, me or the dead guy. But I knew in order to properly fake it, I had to add some vocals to the rhythm.

"Oh, daddy!" I moaned, trying not to breathe. "Oh, yes, daddy!"

Someone slapped on the top of the coffin, urging me on. There was more corpse farting, more crying, more humping, and finally I couldn't handle this anymore without a complete nervous breakdown and I cried out "Oh, god!" and then went still.

Eventually, miraculously, the coffin lid opened. I made it. I was alive. Amazingly, wonderfully alive. Now I needed to find my gun and eat a bullet.

The strongarm monks pulled me out of the coffin, my arms slapping from the dead man's chest cavity, glistening with guck.

"Congrats!" head monk said, giving me an *attaboy* slap on the back. "You really rocked his dead world!"

I wiped my hands on his fake robe.

The rest of the perverts queued up for their shot at playing Megaball, and I managed to stumble into my pants. I even got my gun back. I cocked the hammer and stared deep into the blessed release promised by the inside of the barrel, and then remembered I only had one bullet left, and if anyone should die, it was old caretaker guy.

I looked around for the bike pump, flitting with the idea of filling his nads up with air before sending him to hell. Or maybe I would just pump him up and let him live. Live out the remainder of his pathetic life with unusually large testicles. The humiliation he'd suffer. The stares. The laughter. Plus, it would be impossible to find pants.

Regrettably, the bike pump was nowhere to be found. Neither was old caretaker guy. And I'd apparently won the loser trifecta, because Bill, the man I'd been hired to follow, was also MIA.

Some pinhead hopped into the coffin with Frankengroin, and I picked up the flashlight and

made my way to the exit before the groaning began. I needed some fresh air. I also needed a hatchet and some steel wool, so I could access and scour the last half an hour from my brain.

Conveniently, the exit was a large door marked EXIT, which opened up to some concrete steps. I took them up, and they ended in a maintenance closet, which opened up into the mausoleum. It was an easier—and faster—entrance than the nightmare slide, but lacked the dramatic effect.

I pulled out my gun, did a quick search for old caretaker guy, scared the hell out of some grieving old man, mourning his dead wife or some similar maudlin bullshit, and then made my way through the cemetery, across the street, and into the first place that sold liquor.

Three shots and two beers later, I called the police.

Chapter 9

The cop I called was a somewhat tasty little morsel named Lieutenant Jackie “Jack” Daniels. So-so face, great legs, nice rack, especially for an older broad. I knew her back in the day, when we were partners in blue, and she continued to have a crush on me almost two decades later.

“I don’t owe you shit, McGlade. And if you bother me again I’m going to send some uniforms over to trash your apartment and beat you with phone books for so long you’ll have area codes embedded in your skin.”

“Pay attention, Jackie. I’m offering you a prime bust here. As we speak, there’s a group of perverts running a train on a dead guy with gonads the size of a Thanksgiving turkey.”

“Let me guess. Is it a *Butterball*?”

“They have to be stopped. Would you want some loonies digging you up and poking your cooter after you’ve been laid to eternal rest?”

“Sex with a corpse, disgusting as it is, isn’t a crime, Harry. Didn’t you read *Bloody Mary* by JA Konrath? There was a character in there, did the same thing.”

“I listened to part of the audiobook. The author thinks he’s funny, but he’s not.”

“It’s a he? I thought a woman wrote those books.”

I tried to make my voice sound soothing, a tough trick because I had screamed myself raw.

“Jackie, partner, be a good cop and send a team over to the cemetery. You’ll get brownie points from the Captain, a little TV spotlight, and the satisfaction knowing that you got a bunch of lunatic perverts off the street.”

“What do I charge them with, McGlade? Public indecency? You want me to waste manpower on a minor misdemeanor?”

“Aggravated sexual assault. Trust me. It was aggravating.”

“Who’s going to press charges? The cadaver? You want to bring a corpse to trial? The cross examination would be riveting, I bet.”

I clenched my fist. “Dammit, Jackie! I was violated in ways you can’t even begin to understand. I’ll never be the same. My sex life might very well be ruined, and I won’t be able to ever watch basketball on TV again. And I love basketball. If you don’t arrest these assholes I’m going to go on a killing spree and when they bring me in I’ll tell them you could have stopped it just by doing your job.”

She sighed big, but I knew I’d won. “Cut the melodrama, McGlade. I’ll send a few uniforms over to check it out.”

“If you arrest a creepy old caretaker guy, call me. I’m going to impale him on his mop and make him clean all the floors in Union Station.”

“I got extra tickets to the Bulls game tomorrow. Want them?”

“You can really be a mean bitch sometimes, Jackie.”

I hung up, ordered another tequila, drank it, ordered another, drank it, then called a taxi to take me back to my condo to really start drinking.

Chapter 10

My plan had been to drink so much I didn’t dream. And when I peeled my eyes open, I thought it worked. I couldn’t remember a single nocturnal image, let alone any nightmares.

Then I realized I was lying naked on the kitchen floor, straddling a head of lettuce.

“Oh hell no.”

Like any freaked-out person, I needed answers. So I searched Google, using the terms “post dramatic stress disorder sex with corpses and giant testicles” which linked me to a bunch of unhelpful porn sites. I dutifully surfed them anyway, but there were no answers there.

Then I went to eBay, and I was still the top bidder on everything. Lousy eBastards. I decided I just wouldn’t pay if I won, but then I’d get negative feedback, and negative feedback was permanent. I’m proud of my 99.4% positive score. My only bad mark came from some jerk who didn’t read the whole product description, only the header. I sold him a mint Babe Ruth baseball

card for \$260. The card had some tears and a few bends, but I'd stapled some mint leaves to it. Which I mentioned, in two point font, at the bottom of the listing. Some guys can't take a joke.

Next I checked my email, where I discovered I'd won the Irish lottery, inherited eighty million dollars from an unknown relative, and was asked to shuffle funds into my bank account from the President of Rwanda. They all got my standard response: enthusiastic replies with an attachment supposedly containing my routing number. The attachment really contained an email bomb, which once opened would bombard their computers with tens of thousands of naked pictures of actress Bea Arthur. I called it the Maude Virus.

I had a bit of a hangover, my ass still hurt from where I'd fallen on my keys, and I was hungry. But the only food I had in the condo was that head of lettuce, which I wasn't going to eat even if I were starving to death, so I changed into a slightly less dirty suit and hit the corner convenience store for an overpriced cup of joe, a dose of Advil, and a prepackaged cheese Danish.

It was a gorgeous Chicago day, the sun shining, the lakeshore breeze blowing, the pigeons singing their lovely song. I leaned against the storefront window and called my client.

"Hello?"

"Is this Maxine Drawbridge?"

"It's Norma Cauldridge."

I rubbed my nose. "Hi, Maxine. It's Harry McGlade. I need more money."

"Did you find something out, Mr. McGlade?"

"I did. And it's ugly. Real ugly. Plus, I was gravely injured during my surveillance." I smiled at my unintentional pun, which was actually intentional. "I'm not going near him again without more cash."

"I've already paid you twelve hundred dollars."

My nose still itched, so I scratched it. On the inside.

"I want double that. Think of it as an investment. When the lawyers see the dirt I've got on old Roy, you'll take the freak for every dime he has."

I removed my finger, noted something gray and waxy stuck to the end. I'd been picking my nose for years, and this was the strangest booger I'd ever seen.

"Who's Roy?"

"Whatever the hell his name is."

I took a closer look. Sniffed. It smelled familiar.

“Do you have pictures?”

“I will. Send the money to my PayPal account. My email is... oh god...”

The odor was rotten meat and formaldehyde. Somehow, while I was in the coffin, I’d gotten a hunk of dead flesh up my nose. Dead flesh covered in boogers. And a nose hair.

I leaned over and puked up the coffee, Danish, and Advil. Eighteen bucks and change, shot to hell.

“Mr. McGlade? Are you there?”

I wiped a toe through the puke, looking for the Advil. They were probably still good. Instead, I saw something that made me want to quit eating forever.

Part of a human ear.

I got closer, sure it had to be some coincidentally-shaped chunk of chewed Danish.

No, it was an ear. The upper, cartilagey part. I often nibbled women’s ears when we were fooling around. I must have got caught up in the role-playing and bitten off a hunk.

“Mr. McGlade?”

“Scratch that. I want triple.”

“That’s outrageous.”

“Lady, I went to third base with a dead guy last night, all because of your husband. Pay me, or find some other schmuck to do your dirty work.”

“You did what with a dead guy?”

“Don’t believe me? You want to talk to him?”

I held my cell phone over the ear. Then I realized I was acting a bit hysterical. Maybe I was still asleep, and this was just a dream.

I felt my backside, wondering if the pain in my ass was truly from sitting on my keys, or from something that was *still up there...*

I stuck my hand inside my pants, reaching down the plumber’s crack...

It’s a dream, it has to be a dream...

A pigeon waddled over, pecked up the ear, and ran off. My fingers crept closer...

“Mr. McGlade?”

A dream, all a dream, just a harmless dream...

And then I touched the severed end of something that shouldn’t be there. Something that felt

like a Pepperidge Farm County Style Breakfast Sausage Link.

“Please!” I cried out. “If there’s any decency left in this cruel world, let this be a dream!”

Chapter 11

It was a dream. I woke up in bed next to an empty bottle of tequila. Blessedly, there was no head of lettuce between my legs. And the puddle of puke on my pillow didn’t contain anything resembling human flesh. I did a nose check and an ass check, and they were both free and clear.

So much for drinking away the nightmares.

I rolled out of bed, padded to the can, showered, dressed in a slightly less dirty suit than yesterday, and visited the local convenience store for a coffee, Danish, and some Advil. That should have been my tip off I’d been dreaming—paying eighteen bucks for those three items. I forked over the real-life money—twenty-six bucks—then called Mrs. Drawbridge and demanded quadruple my rate. She reluctantly agreed, and mentioned her husband was in bed, still asleep. I decided to stakeout her house and tail him. And this time, I’d be taking some sophisticated equipment.

I returned to the condo and entered my Crime Lab. It was actually an extra bedroom that I converted into a crime lab by stocking it with spy stuff and writing *Crime Lab* on the door. The modern private detective had to stay current with modern gadgetry, so I bought all of the latest high-tech stuff. Phone tappers. Listening devices. Infra red things. A remote control tank with a miniature video camera hooked up to the turret. Cell phone jammers. A set of brass knuckles with a microchip inside that played Pat Benatar when I socked somebody. All the essentials.

I popped the SanDisk memory card out of the tank and plugged it into my computer, to check the footage I’d recorded during my practice run. The video was a little choppy, but more than acceptable.

The first scene was of a dog in Grant Park, urinating.

Cut to the same dog, pooping.

Cut to another dog, pooping.

Cut to the first dog, eating the second dog’s poop.

Cut to a third dog, trying to hump the first dog, who was still munching on the poop.

Cut to the poop, which didn’t look like it warranted being eaten.

Cut to some gangbanger punk, running off with my tank.

Cut to me explaining to the cop why I fired my gun in a populated area, and then me getting arrested.

With some editing, and the right soundtrack, the footage could be the backbone of a really good documentary about urban crime, and the amusing social lives of dogs.

I opened up a fresh SanDisk card, put that in the tank, and loaded everything into in a gym bag, along with a digital camera that could shoot night-vision, a Bionic Ear listening cannon, and a little wind-up nun that shot sparks out of her eyes. Thusly equipped, I high-tailed it over to the long term garage, jumped in my stakeout car—an inconspicuous green Chevy El Camino with yellow racing stripes on the hood—and drove to Jim Drawbridge’s house.

The key to any successful stakeout is three-fold: Food, tunes, and a pot to piss in. The food should consist of chips and snack cakes. Sugar and carbohydrates jack up the insulin level, which leads to a heightened sense of awareness, probably. The music should be high energy, like heavy metal, but don’t include the power ballads. The piss pot can be an old milk jug or thermos. Try to avoid cellophane potato chip bags, as I’ve learned from experience they tend to leak.

Since I never knew when I’d have to go on a stakeout, I kept my car stocked with everything I needed. But once I found a suitable vantage point—on the street directly in front of Jim’s house—I realized I was less stocked than I should have been. I was way low on sugary snacks, but had a surplus of urine in an old apple juice bottle. Unless it was, perhaps, actually apple juice. A quick sniff would tell me.

It was urine. And I needed to stop eating asparagus.

I took a moment to muse about the gratuitous amount of bodily fluids that seem to have come up in this case, and cracked open the door and dumped the piss onto the street, where it made a foamy little river down the curb and to the sewer drain.

Then I cranked up the Led Zeppelin, licked the crust out of some old Twinkie wrappers, and waited for Jim to show up.

After half an hour, the coffee needed to be set free, so I filled up half the apple juice bottle. The secret to zero splatter is aiming for the inside edge, and then squeezing dry rather than shaking.

After an hour, Mrs. Drawbridge came out of the house and knocked on my window.

“George left before you got here.”

“Do you have any snacks?”

“No.”

I noticed she had some orange powder in the corner of her unattractive mouth.

“You have cheese curls,” I said.

“No I don’t.”

“Bring me the cheese curls.”

She folded her arms. “I don’t have any.”

“You have Cheetos dust on your lips.”

“I was eating carrots.”

“Were they powdered carrots?”

“Maybe.”

“Bring me the goddamn Cheetos, or I’m off the case.”

She frowned and waddled off. I called after her, “And anything Hostess or Dolly Madison!”

I air guitared in perfect synchronization with Jimmy Page until the ugly wife returned with my treats. The Cheetos bag only had a few left in the bottom, and Mrs. Drawbridge’s cheeks were puffed out chipmunk-style. She also brought me half a raspberry Zinger.

“You ate them,” I said, stating the obvious.

She shook her head. “Mmphmtmummuffff.”

“Don’t lie. You did. You’re still chewing.”

“Ummurrfumamm.”

“Are too.”

She swallowed, and I watched the large lump slide down her throat.

“I think my husband went to his parent’s house,” she said after smacking her lips.

“What am I supposed to do with half a Zinger? It’s like the size of my thumb.”

“I said I think my husband went to his parent’s house.”

“Who?”

“My husband. After his parents died, he refused to sell it. I’m not allowed to go over there. He’s got all kinds of locks and security devices. I think he may be hiding something.”

I scarfed down the rest of the cheese curls, then washed them down with the remaining half a Zinger. It wasn’t even half. Maybe a third, at best.

“I’m the detective, lady. I’ll decide if he’s hiding anything. Gimme the address.”

She gave it to me. It was in the neighborhood of Streeterville, less than a mile away.

“I’ll call you in exactly two hours. If you don’t hear from me, I want you to call Lt. Jacqueline Daniels in District 26 and tell her where I am. Tell her it’s an emergency. Did you get that?”

“Yeah. Is that apple juice?”

I glanced at my pee bottle.

“Yeah. But it’s warm.”

“I have ice in the house.”

“Help yourself.”

She took the piss, and I started the car and drove off. Little did I know I was about to face the darkest moment of my entire career. A moment so dark, that had I known it was coming, I would have done something else instead, like see a movie, or go to the zoo and bang on the windows in the monkey house. But I didn’t know what was going to happen, because I couldn’t predict the future, because if I could I would have predicted the lottery numbers and been super-rich and never would have needed the money that caused me to go to that house in Streeterville, which was the darkest moment of my entire career. So that’s where I went. Unbeknownst to me.

In hindsight, I really shouldn’t have gone.

Chapter 12 aka The Darkest Moment Of My Career

So I had no idea I was heading into the darkest moment of my career, but I went anyway. Before going there, however, I stopped for red hots at Fat Louie’s Red Hots on Clark and got a dog with the works. It was terrible, and I have really low standards. In my humble opinion, hot dogs shouldn’t have veins. Or anything resembling a foreskin. I could barely choke the third one down.

Uncomfortably sated, I pressed onward to Phil’s parent’s house. The house was unassuming enough. Split-level, single family, red brick exterior. There was an oak tree out front, and a chainlink fence partitioning off the tiny backyard. I parked on the street, then took out my remote control surveillance tank. After double-checking the batteries, servos, memory card, remote sensor, camera focus, tread alignment, and wireless frequency, I gingerly set the tank down in the street and a taxi ran it over.

Damn taxi jerks. I decided to charge it to Mrs. Drawbridge’s bill.

My next course of action was to figure out my next course of action. I played a little more

air guitar, broke an air string, put on a new one and spent a minute air tuning it, and then decided on my approach.

I could put on my ghillie suit—a mesh shirt and pants with real and fake grass and shubbery sewn into it that I ordered from PsychoSniper.com—and then slowly belly-crawl across the lawn, traverse the fence using a carbide steel bolt cutter, inch my way into the backyard, creep up the porch in slow increments stopping often to pretend to be a potted plant, trick his surveillance system by recording a loop from his outdoor camera and feeding the playback into the main line, drill into his door frame using a cordless screwdriver to disable the burglary alarm sensor, pick the pick-proof Schlage deadbolt, and sneak inside his house using my Invisible Voyeur NightVision Goggles, which I bought at CautiousStalker.org.

Or I could knock on the front door and ask what's up.

"What's up?" I asked when the front door opened.

Since I'd seen him yesterday, Ken had gone from half a sunburned face to a full sunburned face. The smell coming from his house was real bacon, which sure beat the smell of fake bacon, which my mother used to make out of soy and library paste and brown Crayons.

"Who are you?"

"Housing inspector." I flashed him my PI badge, too fast for him to read it. "I'm here to check for gas leaks. Are you leaking any gases?"

"No. Can I see that badge again?"

"I smell something. Are you cooking in there?"

"No, I'm not."

"Is it bacon?" I smacked my lips. "I love bacon. I read somewhere that you could shave with bacon. Rub it on your face raw, and it lubricates better than shaving cream. Have you ever heard of that?"

"No."

"I tried it once. Closest shave I ever had. But I got an E. Coli infection and they had to remove eight yards of my large intestine. Can I come in?"

"No. Hey, you look kind of familiar."

I flashed an *aw shucks* grin. "I get that a lot. I've made a few videos. You might know my screen name, *Sir Dix-A-Lot*."

"I don't think that's it."

“Ever see *Snow White and the Seven Blowjobbs?*”

“No.”

“*Robin Hood, Prince of Anal?*”

“I don’t think so.”

“*The Empire Strikes Scat?*”

“Maybe you should come in. I may have some gases for you to check on.”

I nodded, stepping into his humble abode. It was no surprise he let me in. Fast talking is one of my special skills. That and being able to swallow pills. If I had a super power, it would be the ability to swallow a whole handful of pills at once. Big pills too. None of that baby aspirin crap for babies. I secretly hoped that one day I’d get cancer, and the doctor would prescribe me a lot of pills, and he’d tell me to space them out throughout the day because there were so many, but I’d tell him no need to and grab the whole handful and swallow them up right there while he watched, amazed.

That’s what I was thinking about when Phil hit me in the head with the hammer.

Chapter 13

I awoke from a terrible dream that I was trapped in a coffin with an inhumanly large-testicled man, to the terrible reality of being tied to a chair in some freak’s basement.

Said freak was standing over me, staring.

“You’re awake,” he said.

“No I’m not.”

I shook my head, which caused a spike of pain. My left eye stung, and I looked down my nose and saw some dried blood on my cheek. The freak still held the hammer. He waved it in front of my face in a way I’m sure he thought was menacing, which actually was pretty menacing.

“Yes you are! And I know what you want! That whore hired you!”

“Which whore? I know a lot of whores.”

He poked me in the chest with the hammer. “She hired you to spy on me! To find out what secrets I had hidden in my parent’s house! Well, now you’ll be privy to those secrets, Mr. Private Eye! Because I’m going to show them to you!”

I checked my bonds, noted he had used the same clothesline he’d purchased at the hardware

store. The knots were tight, expert. My legs were bound as well, tied to the steel chair legs of the steel chair, which was made of steel. The basement was unfurnished, concrete floor, I-beams and joists exposed in the ceiling, menacing curtains sectioning off the area we were in.

“Got any aspirin?” I asked. “Some asshole hit me with a hammer.”

“Silence!”

“And can you please stop shouting? I’m right here. It’s not like I’m in another part of the house and you’re calling me for dinner.”

The freak chuckled, the nostrils on his large nose flaring out.

“Oh, funny you should mention dinner. Because the main course...” He cackled.

“Yeah?” I asked.

“The main course...” More cackling.

“What’s the main course, Emeril?”

“The... main course... is...” Hysterical laughter now.

I interrupted him. “I got it. The main course is me. You’re going to eat me. Scary. What a scary guy you are.”

“Not me, Mr. McGlade. You’re going to be a snack,” cackle cackle, “for my... zombie wife!”

I waited for the giggles to die down before I said, “Dude, your wife isn’t a zombie.”

“Yes she is.”

“She’s not even dead. I just saw her like an hour ago.”

“Not that hag. I mean my first wife. The love of my life, tragically taken from me after only one year of marriage.”

“So what about that ugly chick back at your house?”

“Her? I married her for the money.”

I smiled. “Thank god. I thought you were totally nuts there for a minute.”

“No kidding. She’s a real heifer, isn’t she?”

“I said in the first chapter that it was like God took a dare to make the most unattractive woman possible.”

“Yes, that’s Norma.”

“Who?”

“My second wife! But now it’s time for you to meet my first wife! And to feed her! Do you

know what a necromancer is, Mr. McGlade?”

I shrugged. Not an easy task when tied up. “I meant to look it up.”

“It’s someone who has the power to raise the dead. Since Roberta died...”

“Who?”

“My first wife.”

“This is a lot of names to keep straight. Can you write them down on a sticky pad for me?”

He didn’t take the bait. I’d hoped he would have gone off in search of a sticky pad, which would have given my time to scoot my chair over to the menacing curtains hanging from the ceiling and hide behind them. He’d never think to look for me there, and would probably go watch TV or something.

But he was too smart to be tricked.

“Since Roberta died, I’ve been searching for a way to bring her back. Now, through a combination of magic and science—something I call sci-magic—I have finally gained mastery over death! Behold, Mr. McGlade, the living dead!”

He cast aside the menacing curtain. Hanging from the ceiling was a dead body.

“Is that her?” I asked.

“That, indeed, is Roberta, my Zombie Wife!”

He spread out his hands, as if waiting for applause. Even if I wasn’t tied up, I wouldn’t have applauded.

“That’s not a zombie,” I said. “That’s a dead chick hanging on a rope.”

“Really, Mr. McGlade? Really?”

“Yeah. Really.”

“Well, watch this then.” He turned to face the corpse. “Roberta, my love, come to me!”

Phil grabbed an overhead rope, and Roberta swung forward using a system of weights and pulleys. He made her wave at me.

“You’re butt nuts,” I said.

“She lives, Mr. McGlade! And she thirsts for your flesh! For nothing else can quell the hunger of the living dead! Isn’t that right, Roberta?”

He tugged another rope, and she nodded. Actually, it was more of a sideways flop than a nod.

“Look, buddy, this has all been tremendously entertaining, but what do you say we untie me,

I go to the cops, and you get put in a nice room with soft rubber walls so you don't hurt yourself?"

"I'm not crazy! Roberta is one of the walking dead!"

"More like the swaying dead."

He got in my face. "Admit she's undead!"

"No."

"But she moves! See!"

He made her do a little dance.

"You're making her move using pulleys and ropes, like some strange sad puppet."

He raised the hammer, aiming for the same spot where he hit me before. "Say she's a zombie!"

"She a zombie," I said quickly. "You're a genius who has conquered death. I'm in awe of your brilliance."

He stared at me hard, and then spun and yanked the dead chick closer. I realized she was naked, and her boobs were missing. I always notice little things like that. Her skin had become dark brown and wrinkly, like a giant raisin. Whack job had also cut some blue eyes from a magazine or poster, and stapled them over her eye sockets. Her teeth were bared, the corners of her mouth turned up. Twist ties, to make it look like she was smiling.

It was kind of endearing, in a raving psychotic way.

"Roberta does seem sort of tired today." He caressed what was left of her cheek. "Perhaps she needs another treatment. I shall fetch the Rejuvenation Ray!"

He scuttled insanely off, and I wondered what time it was, and if his butt ugly whore of a second wife had remembered to call Lieutenant Jackie when I failed to check in. Then I remembered I'd given her a bottle full of piss and told her it was apple juice, so I probably couldn't count on that particular horse to come in.

Like it had happened so many times before, the burden of saving my own skin rested on my own skin. I needed to figure out some sort of ingenious plan to escape. If I could only do that, then I'd be free.

Freak boy returned, pushing a wheeled wine cart stacked with electronic equipment. He shoved it in front of his living undead zombie wife who was really just a putrefying corpse.

"Behold the Rejuvenation Ray, Mr. McGlade!"

“How do you know my name, anyway?”

“Your wallet.”

“I had eight bucks in there. It better still be in there.”

“I didn’t take your money.”

“And a Blockbuster Video card. They charge you five bucks if you lose that.”

“Silence! Through magnetron technology, I have harnessed the life-giving properties of ordinary microwaves, coaxing the spirit back into the body!”

“That’s a big microwave?”

“Behold!”

He hit a switch, and the stack of electronics hummed and whirred, throwing off an huge amount of heat. Most of it was directed at Roberta, the undead living zombie wife. Some of it came my way, and it hurt like a bad sunburn.

Then the smell hit me. Honey baked ham and bacon strips. I watched through squinty eyes as Roberta sizzled and popped and exuded a scent that was downright mouth-watering.

Now it all made sense. Phil’s sunburn. Why he smelled like ham. Why his first wife’s skin was so brown and wrinkly. Why his second wife smelled like sweaty feet.

Actually, this didn’t explain why his second wife smelled like sweaty feet. But I guessed that to be a hygiene thing.

Blofeld finally turned off the microwave stack, then embraced his hanging wife. The embrace became a kiss. The kiss became a nibble. The nibble became a corn-on-the-cob chow-down, and I realized what had happened to the zombie’s breasts.

“And now!” He wiped the grease off his mouth with his sleeve. “Now it is time for Roberta to feast!”

Fred reached under the cart, pulled out a meat cleaver. Didn’t see too many meat cleavers, outside of a butcher shop.

“What shall we start with, Roberta? The leg? Yes, I agree. The leg looks delicious. Do you prefer the left on or the right one, dear? Yes, the left one.”

He raised the cleaver. There are few things more terrifying than being tied to a chair about to be hacked up by a lunatic so he could feed the pieces to his dead wife who he thinks is actually a zombie and is hanging from the ceiling using an admittedly clever series of weights and pulleys.

“Stop!” I yelled.

Incredibly, he stopped.

“What?”

“Your parents!” I said, speaking quickly. “What would your parents think?”

“Why don’t we... ask them!”

He stepped over to the menacing curtain, and with a flourish drew it back. Mom and Dad were hanging there, roped together so it looked like Dad was giving it to Mom, doggy-style.

“Oops!” Fred said, tugging on ropes and making his parents bump uglies. “Daddy! Why are you hurting Mommy?”

He pulled the cord again and again, Dad’s hips rising and falling. A shrink would have a field day with this guy. Field days were fun. I liked dodge ball best.

“Say that again, Daddy? You’re wrestling? What wrestling move is that?”

It looked, to my untrained eye, like a sodomyplex. I tore my eyes away and pointed at something with my chin. “What’s that hanging next to them?”

“Fluffy. My cat.”

“And those tiny things?”

“My goldfish, BA and Hannibal. Fluffy loves to chase them around. Don’t you, Fluffy?”

More manic pulling of ropes, and the three dead animals knocked into each other. While he was preoccupied, I called out in my best falsetto, “Honey, it’s Roberta!”

John turned his attention back to Roberta the zombie living bacon wife.

“Dearest? Did you say something?”

“I said,” I said, “We should let Mr. McGlade go. I’m not hungry right now.”

Nut job was buying it. He wrapped his arms around her, nuzzling against her tasty ribs.

“But you need to eat, honey. You’re getting thinner and thinner.”

“Tack a couple of tomatoes to my chest. I’ll look a lot better.”

Bert began to laugh. A chilling laugh that chilled me. He spun, pointing the cleaver at my nose.

“You idiot! Do you think I’m that stupid?”

“Yes.”

“What good husband doesn’t know the sound of my wife’s own voice?”

“You, I was hoping.”

“Enough of this tomfoolery! This ends now!”

He launched himself at me, screaming and drooling insanely, his probably very sharp cleaver raised for the killing blow.

Then Lieutenant Jackie Daniels shot him in the head.

Chapter 14

“You’re an idiot, McGlade,” Jackie said, using the cleaver to cut away the ropes.

Carl was dead on the floor. He was finally with his wife. Because she was dead on the floor too. Jack had made me sit there until the Crime Scene Unit arrived, taking pictures and gathering evidence. They cut the bodies down before they freed me.

“So how did you know I was here?” I asked.

Jack wore a short skirt and heels that probably cost a fortune but still looked kind of slutty, just how I liked them.

“Norma Cauldridge,” she said.

“Who?”

“George Cauldridge’s wife.”

“Who?”

“She called me, wanted me to arrest you for trying to poison her. I asked where you were, and she said probably here. After we nabbed those necrophiliacs at the cemetery last night, I needed to find you anyway to get your statement. Lucky I heard your girlish screams which gave me probable cause to bust in here without a warrant.”

I wasn’t listening, because it sounded like a boring infodump.

“Can I give you my statement tomorrow?” I asked. “I gotta take a monster dump. I had some hot dogs earlier that are going to look better coming out than going in.”

Jackie leaned in close. I braced myself for the kiss. It didn’t come.

“Did you give Norma a bottle full of your urine and tell her it was apple juice?”

“Maybe. Did she drink any?”

“She said the second glass went down rough. She’s going to sue you, McGlade.”

“She can take a number. Seriously. I’ve got one of those number things. I swiped it from the deli.” I grinned. “You can come over later, and watch me cut the cheese. You know you want to.”

“I’d rather gouge out my own eyes with forks.”

“Don’t be coy. This could be a way to pay back what you owe me.”

She cocked her hips, hot and sexy. “Excuse me? I just saved your ass, McGlade.”

“Are you kidding? This is front page news. You’ll probably get a promotion. There’s no need to thank me. It’s all part of the service I perform.”

“I really think I hate you.”

“Really, Jackie?” I raised an eyebrow. “Really?”

She nodded. “Yeah, really. Be in my office tomorrow morning for your statement. And try to stay out of trouble until then.”

I stood up, stretched, and gave her one of my famous Harry McGlade smiles.

“I’ll try. But trouble is my business.” I winked. “And business is good.”

THE LOST (FOR A GOOD REASON)

ADVENTURE OF ANDREW MAYHEM

An Andrew Mayhem Thriller by Jeff Strand

Hi. Andrew Mayhem here. I'm about to share a tale with you, and I do so with the best of intentions: shameless promotion. Because I truly want you to buy my books, and I figured that including this dorky little bonus story with your purchase might persuade you to empty your wallet and/or purse for the longer stuff.

The challenge with this kind of promotional effort, of course, is that I had to figure out which story I wanted to tell. It had to be something engaging, but yet not *too* engaging, because Harry McGlade gets whiny when you upstage him.

Then Roger, my best friend and handy sidekick, suggested that I share the tale of how he and I met for the first time. And even though Roger is scheduled to meet a ghastly death in book #37, I thought that sounded like a great idea!

So let's turn back the clocks to when I was but a wee lad of age thirteen, where every day was filled with magic and wonder, where butterflies flapped their wings in meadows, and where two best friends joined forces for the first time...

* * *

"I don't want to hold the baby."

"I don't want to hold the baby, either."

"Well, *somebody* has to hold the baby."

"I know! Let's let Clumsy Joe hold the baby!"

"That's a great idea! Clumsy Joe can hold the baby!"

"Hey, Clumsy Joe! Come over here for a minute!"

I walked up to the front of the classroom, which was currently functioning as a theatre stage.
"Hi, fellas. What's going on?"

Tim, who was my best friend in Ms. Peckin's seventh-grade class, held out the naked baby doll to me. "Here, Clumsy Joe. Why don't you hold the baby?"

"Oh, I don't know," I said, shaking my head. "I'm pretty clumsy."

"That's okay. We trust you, Clumsy Joe."

"Well, all right..."

"Okay, I think we've seen enough," said Ms. Peckin from her desk. "The three of you can sit down."

"But we weren't done!" I insisted.

"Don't argue with me, Andrew Mayhem. That skit was not appropriate and you know it."

I just stood there, appalled. We'd spent an entire evening coming up with the clever dialogue and shocking plot twist (Clumsy Joe drops the baby). And I personally had spent several hours rigging up and testing the baby doll so that the fake blood sprayed just right when it hit the tile floor. Ms. Peckin hadn't notified us about any content restrictions on the assignment beforehand, so how dare she decide at the last second that baby splatter was inappropriate?

"Does that mean we get an F?" I asked.

"No, it means that you'll redo the assignment. Now sit down."

I sat down. Vile old twenty-five year-old crone. Revenge was in order. Sweet, cruel, delicious revenge.

* * *

The following Monday, Ms. Peckin walked out into the school parking lot to find her car covered with bloody dismembered baby doll body parts.

Somehow she figured out that I was responsible.

* * *

Detention was not unknown to me. I sat up front, staring at the periodic table of the elements poster on the wall, wishing the clock would magically fade to an hour from now the way it did in the movies.

Ms. Peckin looked up from the paper she was grading as the classroom door opened.

"You're fifteen minutes late," she said.

"I couldn't find the room."

"Then you're here until 5:00."

I turned around as the kid sat down.

"Up front, please," said Ms. Peckin.

The kid got up and sat down next to me. I didn't recognize him, but he was extremely skinny and had a sizable nose.

"What am I supposed to do while I'm here?" he asked.

"Just sit."

"No homework?"

"Just. Sit."

The kid nodded. When Ms. Peckin returned to brutally savaging the paper she was grading (at least, that was a safe assumption), the kid turned to me and rolled his eyes. I rolled my eyes back.

We sat there for a long moment.

The kid took out a blue pen and wrote on his palm. He quickly flashed the message to me: "I'm Roger."

I didn't have a pen handy, but he passed his over to me. I wrote "I'm Andrew" on it and flashed it to him.

Roger nodded, and wrote a message on his other hand. "Ms. Peckin seems pretty cool."

What the hell was he talking about? Ms. Peckin was the evil antithesis of cool! Clearly, the new kid was wacky in the head. I gave him a facial expression that indicated that I felt he was wacky in the head.

He kept holding up his hand to show me his fatally flawed message.

Ms. Peckin looked up again. "What are you doing?"

Roger balled his hand into a fist. "Nothing."

Ms. Peckin stood up and walked out from behind her desk. "Let me see what's in your hand."

"It's nothing."

"Open it."

Roger opened his hand and smiled sheepishly. Ms. Peckin read the message. "Oh. Well, this time is really meant for silent reflection, so no more of that, okay?"

"Yes, ma'am."

We both got out at 4:45.

* * *

As we walked home from school, Roger told me his life story, which even for a seventh grader was pretty uneventful. He'd lived in Arizona all his life, until his dad got a job in Chamber, Florida.

"What is there to do in this town?" he asked.

"Well...you can go to school, I guess."

"Joy."

"Do you like comics?"

"They're okay."

"You can buy comics."

"Okay."

"There's a guy who wanders around quoting TV shows while he's giving everybody the finger. He's been doing it since before I was born. You can watch him if you want."

"So basically, you're saying that Chamber sucks."

I shook my head. "No, it's not that bad. We've got a movie theatre, and they're going to be opening this new place called The Blizzard Room that I think is going to be an ice cream shop."

"So basically, you're saying that Chamber sucks."

"Okay, yeah."

"There aren't even any cute girls in school, except for Ms. Peckin."

"Don't even joke about that. The whole school will beat you up."

"Did you know my neighbor is a psycho killer?"

I stopped walking, unsure where this sudden shift in the direction of our conversation had come from. "Huh?"

"He is. I think. He wanders around his living room waving a butcher knife and talking to himself."

"How do you know this?"

"I saw him through my telescope. I was watching his house hoping that Ms. Peckin lived there."

"I mean it, stop joking about Ms. Peckin. Even the band geeks will kick your ass."

"I just thought the whole butcher knife thing was kind of weird, that's all."

"Well, *yeah*. Did you call the police?"

"No. They'd just tell me to stop peeking in people's windows with a telescope."

"What does he talk to himself about?"

"I don't know. I can't read lips. But he's done it the past couple of nights. He's quaint."

"I'd like to see that," I said. "I've never watched a psycho killer rant before."

"Well, what are you doing this weekend?" Roger asked.

I shrugged. "Watching TV."

"Anything good on?"

"Does it matter?"

"If you wanted to come over, we could watch TV and my neighbor."

"Sure. Sounds like fun."

* * *

"How did your skit go?" asked my dad as I walked into the living room.

"That was last week."

"Well, how did it go?"

"Pretty good."

"What was it about again?"

"Shakespeare."

"Oh, yeah. That's right."

"Hey, can I spend the night at a friend's house tonight?" I asked.

"Which friend?"

"Roger. He just moved here."

"Is he a miscreant?"

"No."

"Did you take out the garbage this morning like you were supposed to?"

I hesitated. "Part of it."

My father sighed. "You really need to get out of the habit of lying, son. Guilt doesn't make a very fluffy pillow."

"I don't even know what that means."

"Someday you'll understand. Yeah, you can spend the night, but do the dishes first."

I peeked into the kitchen. "There aren't any dishes."

"Then clean your room."

"I haven't messed it up since mom cleaned it yesterday."

"Then...I dunno, do *something* to demonstrate responsibility."

"If you give me some money, I'll spend it responsibly."

"Don't be a smartass."

"I wasn't. I was offering to demonstrate fiscal responsibility." I didn't get that C+ on my economics test without learning a few things.

"You know what, Andrew? You're going to have smartass kids just like you, and they're going to drive you to an early grave."

"Yeah, right."

"And I'll be having a big ol' laugh at you from the early grave that you drove me to. Go on, get out of here."

"No money, huh?"

"Oh, all right. But don't tell your mother."

* * *

Roger's second-floor bedroom consisted of a bed, a dresser, a telescope, and lots of unpacked boxes. We'd spent the evening watching television in a pleasant state of zombie-like vegetation, and now I was unrolling my sleeping bag out onto his bedroom floor.

"See anything?" I asked.

"A few naked women having a pillow fight. Ooooh...good hit! That had to hurt!"

"What about your neighbor?"

"He's just sitting there, reading a book."

"What if he looks up and sees you?"

"I'll scream like a girl and faint."

"Good plan."

"Thanks."

We just hung out in his room for a while, chatting about subjects that were awe-inspiring in their lack of substantive content, until finally—

"Oooh, he's doing something," said Roger, adjusting the telescope. "He's walking around, yep, he's got the butcher knife...take a look at this!"

I peeked through the telescope. Roger's neighbor, a slightly overweight, balding guy who looked about forty, was indeed pacing around his room, waving a butcher knife.

"Holy cow," I said. "He's gone nutzoo."

"I told you. Can you figure out what he's saying?"

I stared at his mouth, but there was no way to translate. He was speaking very quickly and animatedly, poking the air with his butcher knife for emphasis.

"He's saying, 'Roger...Roger...the time of reckoning is at hand...sweet, delicious Roger, I've killed for our love and will do so again...'"

"Shut up," said Roger, laughing.

"He's got your picture tattooed on his chest."

"Seriously, what's he saying?"

"I can't tell. Something funky, I bet."

"So is that weird or what?"

"Pretty weird. But it doesn't mean he's a killer. He could just be a torturer."

"We should go over and get a closer look."

"Yeah, right. What if we get caught?"

"Death. Dismemberment. Extra chores."

I peeked through the telescope again. "We'd better not. There's definitely something wrong with this guy. At least there's no blood on the knife. That's a good sign."

"Let's go over."

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because I don't do dumb things that will get me in trouble."

"Oh, come on. Don't be such a wuss."

"I'm not a wuss."

"You're a large, large wuss."

"I'm not sneaking over there," I said. "Especially not with you. I barely even know you. You could have bodies stacked in your closet. Here, open your closet so I can make sure there aren't any bodies stacked in there."

"Fine, whatever," said Roger with a sigh. "I didn't want to go over there anyway. I hope he gets the part."

"What part?"

"The play part."

"What play part?"

"He's practicing for a play audition. Something about a serial killer who paces around with a butcher knife."

I gaped at him.

Roger grinned.

"You dork!" I said. "You made this all up?"

"No, I was absolutely serious when I said that he was practicing for a play audition."

I looked around for something to throw at him, preferably something with jagged edges and an internal combustion engine, but there wasn't anything. I settled for calling him a dork again.

"Don't blame me," said Roger. "It's your sorry excuse for a town that forced me to resort to this kind of entertainment."

"There's nothing wrong with Chamber."

"Where else have you lived?"

"Chamber. But there's nothing wrong with it."

"Well, then what should we do?"

"We could watch some more TV."

* * *

Two hours of quality television later, Roger chugged the last of his can of soda and let out a belch that freaked out his cat. "I was lying about him auditioning for a play," he said.

"No, you weren't."

"Okay."

I finished off my own drink and emitted my own, less-effective belch. "You know what would be funny? If somebody thought he really was a psycho killer and called the cops."

"Wanna do it?"

"No."

"Good. That would be wrong."

"What if we just called him up and said 'I know where you buried the bodies.'? We could go on and on and say 'We know what you did, you sick twisted bastard' and at the end of the call just say 'We hope you get the part!' and hang up."

"He'd know it was us."

"How?"

"Because we live next door, dorkwad."

"We could pretend we were strangers from out of town who were peeking in his windows."

Roger grinned. "It might be kind of funny."

"Do you want to call him?"

"No, but you can."

"I might."

"Go for it."

"What's his name?"

"Dennis Catovin."

"Have you got a phone book."

"In the kitchen."

We tiptoed into the kitchen (well, not literally, we just walked quietly) to avoid waking up Roger's parents, although if they could sleep through the monster belches, they could sleep through anything. Roger handed me the phone as he looked up Dennis's number. "Make sure you disguise your voice," he said.

"Yes, sir," I said, disguising my voice.

"Disguise it better."

"Yes, sir," I said, disguising it better. I was going for something in a low, raspy, vaguely sinister motif, but thinking back, it probably just sounded like puberty gone terribly wrong.

I dialed the number and waited.

"Hello?"

"We saw the butcher knife," I whispered. "We know..."

"Fuck!"

A click on the other end, and then a dial tone.

"Oops," I said.

"What happened?" Roger asked.

"He said 'fuck' and hung up."

"Why did he do that?"

"I dunno."

"Well, call him back. Let him know we were just kidding."

I dialed again.

No answer.

And then an answer: "*Leave me alone! You didn't see it!*"

"Uh, Dennis...?"

He hung up again.

"Okay," I said. "That was...weird."

"Did he know it was you?"

"He's never even met me!"

"Is he coming over here?"

"How should I know?"

"Let's go look!"

We hurried upstairs into Roger's room. He immediately peeked through the telescope. "He's there in his living room. He's lying on the floor."

"Is he hurt?"

"I can't tell. The knife is next to him. Oh, jeez, what if he killed himself?"

"Should we call the police?"

"I don't know...I don't see any blood..."

"Maybe we should go over there."

Roger nodded. "Yeah, let's go."

We hurried back downstairs, quietly opened the front door, and then rushed across Roger's yard over to his neighbor's house.

"Should we knock?" I asked.

"No, we shouldn't knock," said Roger, giving me a "You're a rather dumb person" look. He threw open Dennis' door and we walked inside. Dennis still lay on the floor. No pool of blood that I could see. The door swung closed behind us.

"Dennis?" I asked. "Are you okay?"

No response.

"Is he breathing?" I asked.

"I don't know. Why don't you ask him?"

"We should check his pulse."

"You check his pulse!"

"Fine." I cautiously walked over to the body, then knelt down beside it. I pressed my fingers to his wrist.

"Anything?"

"I'm not sure I'm in the right spot."

"Well...poke him with something."

"I'm not going to poke him!"

"Then breathe on him. Do something to wake him up!"

Suddenly Dennis sat up, arms outstretched, and shouted something that sounded approximately like "AAUUGGHHAAA!!!!"

I scooted backward at 37,916 miles per hour and shouted something that sounded approximately like "Shit!" Then I punched Roger in the shoulder as hard as I possibly could. I struck a particularly solid part of his shoulder and it felt like I'd smashed the bones in my hand into bite-sized chunks, but it was worth it.

"Ow! Why'd you hit me?"

"Because you're a jerk!"

"What'd I do?"

"You planned this whole thing! I almost wet my pants! You probably wanted to tell everybody at school that I wet my pants, didn't you?"

"It wasn't me!"

"Yes it was!"

"No it wasn't!"

But then I discovered something truly shocking. Roger had wet his own pants. Would somebody who had plotted out this scheme spontaneously urinate over the revelation of the surprise? Unlikely. So Roger was innocent. I'd struck the shoulder of an innocent man.

I turned my attention away from Roger and toward Dennis. The smug bastard who'd scared me half to death was looking...well, not particularly smug. Not smug at all, in fact. He looked somewhat depressed, and somewhat homicidal.

"Did I scare you?" he asked. I could see the butcher knife on the floor where he'd been lying.

Roger and I both nodded.

He wiped a tear from his eye. "I knew I could scare you. I was good, wasn't I? I can act, right?"

"You sure can," Roger said, eyeing me nervously as if to say "Did you perhaps notice that

this gentleman is sounding depressed and homicidal?"

"I *know* I can! I spent days practicing for that audition! I spend days practicing for *every* audition! So why the hell don't I ever get the part?" He picked up the butcher knife. "Huh? Tell me why I never get the part?"

I said the first thing that popped into my mind: "Because... you have...you've got...um, facial features...that...that...you know, they aren't traditional...and...and...and...you know how Robert De Niro doesn't really look like a movie star, but he's famous, but it probably took a long time because he doesn't...you know...he's got that mole and people who make movies took a while to figure out how good he was, but now they all love him...that's you...you're like Robert De Niro."

"Yeah," said Roger.

Dennis considered that. "De Niro is a god to me."

"He's a god to everybody," I said. "So you just have to keep trying and someday you'll be the next De Niro."

"But he won the Academy Award for *Godfather II* when he was barely thirty years old! I'm forty-six!"

"Well, he probably had a better agent," said Roger.

Dennis raised the butcher knife. "I'll tell you what I'm going to do. I'm going to give the performance of a lifetime. They always say I should be more real. Well, I'll show them just how real I can be! They'll have a pretty hard time saying I'm not real when I gut one of you with this knife, don't you think?"

Though I admittedly couldn't find any holes in his theory, it wasn't a plan of action that I wanted to encourage. "Look, just let us go," I said, as Roger and I cautiously backed toward the door. "We won't say anything."

"If you don't say anything, that wrecks the whole point!" said Dennis, swishing the butcher knife through the air. "I can either go lie in the bathtub, slit my wrists, and die in obscurity, or I can kill one of you and go to prison a celebrity! I sure as hell will get a role in the prison Thanksgiving pageant, that's for sure!"

He took a menacing step forward, and I suddenly relaxed. He was still acting. This was all payback for the phone call prank. He was just trying to scare a couple of whippersnappers, to teach us the error of our ways, to provide a life lesson that would suit us well as we entered maturity.

"I think I'll kill..." Dennis hesitated, looking back and forth between Roger and I, and then pointed the knife at me. "You."

He rushed forward. I still kind of thought he might be trying to help me with my development of a moral core, but my bladder disagreed.

There wasn't time to get the door open, so we rushed across the living room into the kitchen, screaming, with Dennis right behind us. "*Does this seem real? Are you scared?*"

Though of course we couldn't have known the floor plan to Dennis' home beforehand, it still sucked to discover that the kitchen was a dead end.

I grabbed the first available object to defend myself. In a kitchen that no doubt contained knives, forks, meat cleavers, tenderizers, cheese graters, and rolling pins, I felt a little silly trying to be intimidating with a plastic measuring cup, but, hey, sometimes you just have to make the best of things.

"My uncle knows a Hollywood producer," Roger said. "He can get you a big part, I promise."

"Oh yeah? What's his name?"

"Uncle Phil."

"The producer's name, jackass."

"Ummm..."

"Don't try to out-act me, kid. And don't worry, you're not the one who's going to die tonight. You're just the audience."

"Then you can't kill me until we make some popcorn," I said.

Dennis raised an eyebrow. "You're moments away from a horrible, painful death and you're able to make a joke about popcorn?"

I shrugged. It had kind of surprised me, too.

Dennis grinned and pointed the knife at Roger. "Maybe I should kill him instead and make *you* the audience."

"No!" Roger protested. "I want the popcorn!"

Dennis shook his head. "No, I need to go with my original instinct. That's what they tell you in acting school. Go with your instincts." He gestured at Roger with the knife. "Step out of the way."

"No."

"No?" Dennis asked.

Roger shook his head and stepped in front of me. "No. I'm not scared of you. You're a lousy actor. In fact, you suck."

I couldn't believe it! Roger, who I'd met for the very first time that same day, was placing himself between me and a madman with a butcher knife!

I was in awe.

This was somebody I could imagine sharing a friendship with until the end of my years.

I mean, what a *brilliant* freakin' end to the whole joke!

Dennis let out a well-acted scream of primal rage and ran toward us. He shoved Roger out of the way, knocking him into the refrigerator so hard that—

—that it couldn't have been faked.

He swung the knife at me.

Holy shit!

I moved out of the way and the blade sliced across my chest. It hurt about as much as I would've expected a butcher knife cutting my chest to hurt. My feet slipped out from under me and I landed on my butt. As Dennis raised the knife, I wished that I'd never seen any amusement value in clumsy baby dropping.

I kicked Dennis in the shin, hard.

He shouted something obscene, loud.

And then Roger tackled him. As the two of them engaged in a fierce struggle, I kicked Dennis in the opposite shin. He cried out, lost his balance, dropped the knife, struck his head on the counter, and fell to the floor, unconscious.

Roger took a moment to catch his breath. "Are you okay?" he asked.

"Eeep," I said, gaping at the butcher knife that now protruded from my leg.

Roger crouched down next to me. "Is it deep?"

"Eeep."

Roger yanked the knife out. It had only gone in about half an inch, but it still really hurt.

"We need to make a pact," Roger told me. He pressed his finger to the wound on my leg. "A blood pact, that no matter what, we will never, ever, ever tell anybody in the entire world that we wet our pants."

"Agreed," I said, shaking his bloody hand.

And that's basically it. We called the cops, got in a gargantuan amount of trouble, and began a friendship that has continued for twenty years.

Yeah, I know, I'm breaking our pact by telling you about the whole pants-wetting thing now, but technically we made our blood pact using only *my* blood, so it doesn't count.

- The End -

P.S.: For Ms. Peckin's make-up assignment, we did a skit based on Ernest Hemingway daring Mark Twain to eat dog food. We got a D+. We were happy to get it.

SUCKERS

A Harry McGlade/Andrew Mayhem Thriller by JA Konrath & Jeff Strand

Note to fans of Andrew Mayhem: The following tale takes place between the events of *Graverobbers Wanted (No Experience Necessary)* and *Single White Psychopath Seeks Same*. But long enough after *Graverobbers* that Andrew has had time to heal. I mean, let's face it, he was way too messed up at the end of that book to jump right into another adventure, and we don't want the Continuity Police throwing a hissy fit.

Note to readers unfamiliar with Andrew Mayhem: Don't worry, you didn't miss anything that you need to know.

Note to fans of Harry McGlade: Binge drinking is cool.

It all started with mushrooms.

Of course, lots of bad things start with mushrooms, but these were the non-hallucinogenic variety. My wife Helen *despises* mushrooms. I mean, she loathes them with every ounce of her being, and while she's admittedly a rather petite woman, she's able to cram a lot of loathing into those ounces.

I myself am no big fan of mushrooms or other fungi products, although in college we had a lot of fun with fungus when my best friend Roger got Athlete's Foot. We called him "Itchy Roger" over and over and over and over again. I have to admit that it seems a lot less funny now than it was at the time, almost a bit pathetic in fact, but trust me, it was hysterical and kept us entertained for hours on end. The next semester, we entertained ourselves by playing darts with slices of pizza.

Anyway, I was thirty-three and long out of college (well, not *that* long, but that's another story) and I'd spent the evening out drinking with Roger. Of course, we were drinking coffee, and only one cup each because that stuff was expensive as hell. I'd been given two tasks to complete before I returned home:

- a) Purchase a jar of spaghetti sauce.
- b) Ensure that the jar of spaghetti sauce did not include mushrooms.

When I got to the grocery store, I selected a jar of sauce. It had fancy calligraphy on it and a drawing of a smiling man in a chef's hat. The part of my brain that should have been saying "Hey, dumb-ass, don't forget about the no-mushrooms rule!" instead said "Gee, I wonder if this place has any sour gummi bears?" I bought the sauce and the gummi bears and left the store.

As it turns out, the drawing was not a smiling man in a chef's hat. It was a giant mushroom. Damn those poofy chef's hats.

Now, I don't want you to think that my wife is the kind of person who would throw a screaming temper tantrum over me purchasing the wrong variety of spaghetti sauce. Instead,

she's the kind of person who would bottle up rage over my lack of a job, my questionable babysitting habits, the incident where I accidentally didn't shut the freezer door securely and ruined hundreds of dollars' worth of frozen meat, and a few dozen other infractions, and let it all come exploding out of her petite frame in the form of extremely strong disapproval over my choice of spaghetti sauce.

I shouted back at her (though an onlooker might have mistaken it for shameful cowering and groveling) and headed out to do a sauce exchange. As I walked into the driveway, I realized that I'd left my car keys on the kitchen table. Having just been lectured for my lack of responsibility, I didn't think it was a good idea to walk back into the house and sheepishly say "Uh, forgot my keys." The store was only ten blocks away. I'd walk.

To keep the walking time to a minimum, I cut through several backyards. I didn't notice the man breaking into an unfamiliar house until I practically bumped into him. I'm not very observant.

He had wavy brown hair and a two-day beard that looked like dirt on his cheeks in the semi-darkness. Clenched in his teeth was a penlight, aimed down at the doorjamb where he wiggled a pry bar. Upon hearing me he dropped the tool and dug into his trenchcoat, removing a handgun the size of a loaf of handgun-shaped French bread.

"Beeb, brubbubber!" he said.

"I beg your pardon?"

He removed the penlight from his mouth. "Freeze, bloodsucker!"

"I beg your pardon?"

I'd been called a lot of things in my life, many of them only a few minutes ago, but "bloodsucker" was a new one.

The man pointed the gun at me and glanced down at the jar in my hand. "What's that? A jar of Type O positive?"

"It's Momma Helga's Spaghetti Sauce."

"Why does it have a penis on the label?"

"That's a mushroom."

"It looks like a penis."

"No, it looks like a chef's hat. But it's a mushroom."

"Drop the penis sauce and get down on your knees. Then open your mouth."

I didn't want to do that for an infinite number of reasons. "I'd rather not."

The man smacked me in the head with the gun, hard enough to make me see mushroom-shaped stars (which was odd). I got down on my knees as instructed.

"Open wide," the man said, pressing the barrel against my lips.

I opened my mouth.

"Wider."

I opened my mouth wider.

He tilted his head and peered inside, flashing the pen light along my gum line. Then he nodded, apparently satisfied with what he saw. "You can close it now. No fangs. You're cool." He lowered the gun.

I should have made the comment, "Yeah, I lost my baby fangs when I was eight," but I never think of clever stuff like that until a few minutes after the moment has passed. Instead I said, "What the hell are you talking about? And why did you hit me in the head?"

"Pires."

"Pires?"

"*Vampires*."

Oh, goody. A whacko.

"Vampires don't exist," I helpfully pointed out.

The man sneered at me. "They exist, sauce-boy." He tapped the door he'd been prying at with his penlight. "And they're in this house."

- 2 -

Harry

They call me Harry McGlade. Probably because that's my name. I'm a private eye.

My office is in Chicago, and five days ago a desperate woman named Phoebe Mertz retained me to find her daughter, Tanya. Little Tanya was sixteen, into the Goth scene big-time. You know the type: dresses in all black, collects piercings, wears way too much mascara, scowls all the time. Most parents dream their child will go to medical school. Very few dream their child will get a tattoo on their forehead that says, "Life's a toilet."

According to Mom, Tanya had never run away before.

"I know she looks different," Phoebe had said, showing me a picture of a frowning brunette with five nose rings, three eyebrow rings, and too many earrings to count.

"I hope she stays out of lightning storms."

"She's really a good girl. Straight A's. Doesn't do drugs or have a boyfriend."

"She hangs around with other Goths?"

"Yes. All of her friends are into that."

I figured that Tanya was probably in an alley somewhere, stoned out of her mind, while a bike gang ran a train on her.

I shared these thoughts with Phoebe, but it didn't seem to ease her worries.

"I want you to find her and bring her home, Mr. McGlade."

"I get five hundred a day."

"That's a lot of money."

"I'm expensive, but I'm worth it. You're not just paying for the job. You're paying for peace of mind. Once the check clears, I'll find her. Even if she turns up dead and dismembered in an alley."

She burst into tears, obviously relieved I was on the job.

I spent the rest of Day 1 working on the case, subconsciously while I slept.

Day 2 involved me interviewing one of Tanya's school friends, a guy named Steve who'd recently bisected his own tongue down the middle in an effort to look more like a lizard. Steve wasn't talking—his mouth was too swollen. But he had some killer skunk bud and we lit one up.

Day 3 wasn't very productive. I spent most of it at the ballgame, watching the Red Sox kick the hell out of the Cubs. I kept an eye out for Tanya, but she didn't show up.

Day 4 I spent drinking, and can't remember much.

On Day 5 I caught a break. A phone call to a guy I know who works for a credit card company informed me that Tanya's Mastercard was getting a workout down south. Phoebe provided me with plane fare, and I followed the paper trail to a leather bar in the suburbs of Chamber, Florida. Flashing around Phoebe's picture was met with the usual blank stares, until President Grant helped one punk regain his memory.

"Oh yeah, she was here yesterday. Hanging out with some Pires."

Further interrogation revealed that the Pires were a gang of Goths who only came out at night and liked to wear fake fangs and drink each other's blood. I could relate; there wasn't much

good on TV anymore, and kids can get bored in the 'burbs.

After spreading around a lot of Phoebe's cash, I managed to track down the Pires' main hangout, owned by a guy who called himself Vlad. Word on the street, Vlad was thirty-something, balding and overweight, and wore contact lenses that made his eyes look bloodshot. Just the kind of daddy-figure teenage girls found irresistible.

I was in the middle of breaking into Casa de Vlad when sauce-boy wandered over, witnessing my felony-in-progress.

"Look." He tried to smile, but it looked funny with my gun on his cheek. "This is really none of my business, and I really have to get home while the pasta is still *al dente* or I'll be sleeping on the sofa for a week. And our sofa has these big, pointy springs that stick out of the cushions that feel like fish hooks."

"You think I'm an idiot?"

"Actually—"

I gave him another love tap with the butt of my Magnum.

"Here's the deal, sofa-man. I have to get into this house and grab someone. This someone may not want to go with me, and she may have some friends who don't want to see her go. So this is going to be complicated enough without having to worry about the police showing up in three minutes because your pansy sofa-ass went whining to them."

"I won't call the police. The police and I don't have a very good relationship. I kind of annoy them. I—"

I tapped him on the head again. "I wasn't finished."

"Can you please stop—"

Tap. "You're still talking."

He looked at me and opened his mouth to say something, but thought better of it.

I hit him anyway.

"But I didn't—"

"You just did." *Tap.*

I may have tapped him too hard, because he went from his knees onto his ass.

"The thing is, Saucey, much as I'm just dying inside to trust you, it's probably better if I don't. Do you have ten feet of clothesline on you?"

He didn't say anything, which I took to be a no.

"Neither do I. So my only alternative is to knock you out. Now stand up so I can hit you on the head again."

He didn't move.

"Would you prefer me shooting you?"

Slowly, molasses slowly, he got to his knees. I might have felt sorry for the guy, but the sympathy gene skipped a generation.

I reared back and cracked him a good one on the noggin, which made a sound like a belt being snapped. He teetered over and ate the lawn.

I watched him for a full minute. No movement. But he may have been faking unconsciousness to discourage me from smacking him again. Some people are savvy like that.

"You awake?" I asked.

No answer.

"Look, I have to know for sure, so right now I'm going to stomp as hard as I can on your gonads. I'm sure you understand."

I raised a foot and watched him shift slightly.

"*Aspirin...*" he groaned. "*Plentiful aspirin...*"

I sighed. Hitting him again might kill him. Plus, my arm was getting tired.

"Get your ass up. We're switching to Plan B."

The guy took his time getting to his feet, wobbling a little in the process.

"Okay, Saucy. Use the pry bar to break into the house."

"Me?"

"You see anyone else out here?"

He blinked. Then he blinked again. "Why don't you do the manual labor on your own felony?"

"I've got to hold the gun."

"No problem. You can let me hold the gun."

I faked another strike at his head, and when he flinched I stomped on his foot, heel first.

"Put down the goddamn sauce and grab the crowbar. You're pissing me off."

He obeyed.

"Make sure it's in the jamb really good, then put some weight on it."

The door moaned in protest, then popped open. I shined the penlight inside, but it wasn't

strong enough to breach the dark room. I held my breath and listened. No sound came from within.

While I was preoccupied, Sauce-boy took the opportunity to swing the crowbar at me. Luckily, my catlike reflexes switched on and I ducked before he took my head off. I shoved the gun in his face and he froze.

"Sorry. Crowbar slipped."

"Drop it."

He complied.

"Into the house. Stay quiet or the last sound you'll hear is your brain exiting through your eye sockets. It's sort of a *bang/slurp* sound. Trust me, you wouldn't like it."

"This probably isn't new information, but you're kind of a prick."

"You caught me on a bad day. Now move it. Nice and slow."

I marched him three steps into the dark house, unable to see a damn thing. There wasn't a single light on, and all the curtains were drawn. I smelled incense, and something under it. Something funky.

My partner took another step, made an *uumph!* sound, and pitched forward.

I flashed on the penlight to see what he tripped over, and saw it was a naked dead guy with his throat ripped out.

While sauce-boy flailed around like a fish, I played the penlight around the floor, noticing something distinctly odd. The throat wound was so deep the neck vertebrae were exposed.

But there was surprisingly little blood.

- 3 -

Andrew

The man smirked as I scrambled to my feet. Though I make it a point to give all of my fellow human beings the benefit of the doubt, I had pretty much decided that he was a complete asshole.

"What's the matter?" he asked. "Never seen a dead body before?"

Actually, I had. Several of them. Gross ones. But he didn't need to know that, so I shook my head.

The man aimed his penlight back at the corpse's neck. "Looks like the work of Pires." He smirked. "Sucks to be him."

My "complete asshole" assessment remained unchanged. "Oh, *that* was clever."

"Well, somebody had to make the first 'sucks' joke, and you don't look smart enough to have thought of it yourself. The next time you see a vampire-ravaged body with a hollowed-out throat you can use it. But I want royalties."

I extricated myself from the corpse and wiped off my hands on my pants. The body belonged to a young guy with Kurt Cobain greasy blond hair. A pentagram had been carved into his bare chest.

"Are you sure your Pires did this?"

He crouched down next to the corpse, keeping the gun on me. "Looks like it. There's not much blood left."

"Maybe it was oversized mosquitoes. Or maybe Red Cross representatives gone wild."

He glanced at me, not looking happy. "Remember that I got the gun, sofa-boy. I'm the one who gets to make the snide comments."

I sighed and took a quick peek at the still-open doorway. Maybe if I got him talking I'd have a chance to run for it.

"Is that who you were supposed to kidnap?" I asked.

"It's not a kidnapping; it's a rescue."

"Is that who you're supposed to rescue against their will?"

"You're a smart-ass," the man noted. "I can relate to that. What's your name?"

"Andrew Mayhem."

"What's your *real* name?"

"Andrew Mayhem."

"Pretty stupid name."

"And you are...?"

"Harry McGlade."

I quickly tried to think up a hilarious comment (preferably something obscene) that rhymed with "McGlade," but nothing came to mind. And then I decided it wasn't a good idea to be making fun of his name, considering that I was still the one being held at gunpoint. And then I decided I should really be more mature than that anyway, given the circumstances.

"So we're going to call the cops, right?" I asked.

"I'm thinking no."

"Then can we at least get out of here? I'm not real comfortable hanging around a dead body."

"What part of the corpse is bothering you? Is it the ripped-out throat? I bet it's the ripped-out throat."

"I take it that 'respect for the dead' is not a phrase you use on a regular basis?"

He tilted his head. "You know, if I look at the wound on an angle, it reminds me of a stripper I know."

I amended my "complete asshole" assessment to include the words "from hell."

"So this is where we part ways, slowly drift apart, and eventually fail to keep in touch altogether, right?" I asked.

"No dice, Andrew Moron. We gotta search the place. I'm looking for a girl, not a naked dead guy."

I glanced at the corpse and slapped a hand over my mouth. "Oh, God..."

"What?"

"There's a roach crawling out of his mouth..." I dropped to all fours and dry heaved.

Harry shook his head. "I thought you Florida guys were cool with roaches. You call them palmetto bugs, right? It was probably laying eggs in his—"

I spun around and threw a punch that struck him in the stomach. He let out a loud "*ooooomph!*" as he staggered backwards a step, tripped over the dead hand, and then landed butt-first on the corpse. The sound was unbelievably disgusting and does not warrant a phonetic description.

"Aaahhhhh!!!" Harry cried out in a most refreshing sissy-like manner. I punched him in the face, knocking him flat on his back. His butt remained seated on the corpse. The gun remained in his hand.

He sat up a bit and pointed the gun at me. I was pretty sure that Harry McGlade was the kind of guy who would indeed shoot an innocent person such as myself, so I dove at him before he could pull the trigger.

I landed on top of him and we struggled frantically for control of the weapon. Punches were thrown. Head-butts were exchanged. Obscenities were uttered. I'd been in vicious fights before,

but this was the first one to take place on top of a mutilated corpse.

I grabbed the corpse's arm and smacked Harry in the face with it. That seemed to anger him for some reason. I tried to knee him in the groin, but he moved out of the way just in time and I kneed the corpse in the groin instead. I had a flash of the poor dead guy standing in front of the pearly gates, suddenly doubling over in agony.

Harry got in an admittedly good punch to my chest. I got in a much better punch to his jaw. His eyes crossed in a most unattractive manner. I wrenched the gun out of his grip, punched him again, and then pressed the barrel against his forehead.

"You're a dick," he said.

"Behave," I warned him. I eased myself off the dead body, keeping the gun pointed at him.

"These were new pants."

"I weep for your loss. By the way, there wasn't really a roach."

"I guessed that."

"I bet you didn't."

"Look here, Malox—"

"It's Mayhem. You don't get to make fun of my name unless you're holding the gun."

"Whatever. Give it back to me before you hurt yourself."

"I don't think so."

"What are you gonna do? Shoot me? You don't have the stones."

I would have loved to shoot him to prove him wrong. But he would've been dead and the irony would have been lost on him.

"Why do people always say that in the movies?" I asked, using my free hand to massage my aching jaw. "It's sort of like saying 'I double dare you to kill me.' I once ate spoiled oyster on a double dare, and let me tell you, the nightmares from that were a hell of a lot worse than any nightmares I'd get from killing you."

"Put down the gun."

It wasn't Harry who said that. I wished it had been. Instead, the voice was to the left of me. A bald, overweight guy in his mid-thirties dressed entirely in black. He held a shotgun.

I lowered the revolver. I really should've considered that there was probably somebody else in the house besides the corpse. Of course, Harry should have considered that too, so he gets half the blame.

The kitchen lights came on, revealing two goons behind the bald guy. Younger guys who were also dressed entirely in black. The one on the left had one of those ridiculous curved collectors' knives, the kind they sell on the Home Shopping Network that looked like they're used to skin buffalo. Glinting in the overhead florescence, it didn't look ridiculous at all.

His partner had opted for the maniac implement *de jour*—a sixteen inch chainsaw.

Suddenly Harry didn't seem so bad.

"I said drop it," the bald guy said.

I dropped the gun.

The man pointed the shotgun at Harry. "Get off my prey."

"Thank God you showed up," said Harry. "This guy was breaking into your house. I'm part of the neighborhood watch and—"

The man bared his teeth, revealing fangs. "I told you to get off my prey."

Harry scooted off the body and got to his feet.

The man looked back and forth between us, and then smiled. "Which one of you is Harry McGlade?"

"He is," Harry said, pointing at me.

"No, I don't think so," said the man. "I know who you are. We've been watching you for a long time."

"Groupie, huh? You must be Vlad."

"I am indeed."

"I'm Andrew," I said, raising my hand. "I'm uninvolved."

"Not anymore. But you will be soon." Vlad grinned. "Harry, you and I are going to have a pleasant little chat. We have a lot to discuss. Andrew, you're going into the Pit."

"How come Harry gets to have a chat and I have to go to the Pit?"

The two guys behind Vlad simultaneously came at me. I tried to pretend that I wasn't seconds away from losing control over one of my bodily functions. Or perhaps even two of them.

Vlad chuckled. "If you resist, my friends here will cut off your feet, and then they'll drag you to the Pit. I'd advise against making them do so. You'll survive a few minutes longer if you can run."

"I was just getting spaghetti sauce."

Crazy Knife Goon got me in a headlock, and Crazy Chainsaw Goon put his hand on his

starter cord.

"You're at least going to smack Harry around a bit, right?"

"He'll get what's coming to him."

I smirked at Harry. He shrugged. Crazy Chainsaw Goon fondled his cord.

"Okay," I said. "I like my feet. I'll come quietly."

They grabbed me by the shoulders and tugged me into the next room.

- 4 -

Harry

The stoolies carted away Andrew Maudlin, and Vlad gave me his full attention. His bald head had an unhealthy sheen of sweat on it, which dripped down past his double chin and onto the black leather silver buckle bondage vest he wore. What I thought were leather pants were in fact chaps, and under them he wore a black bikini pouch.

Fabio wouldn't have looked good in that getup. Considering that Vlad resembled Ernest Borgnine, the overall effect wasn't pleasant.

"You seem like a reasonable man," I said, watching him play his tongue over the tips of his fangs. "Why don't you just give me Tanya and let us go?"

"What about your little boyfriend?"

"He's not my boyfriend. We've only gone on a couple of dates. He doesn't put out until the third."

He laughed, a high-pitched noise that sounded like a squeaky wheel.

"Ah, the great Harry McGlade. Always quick with the quip. Just like on the TV show."

There used to be a cable series called *Fatal Autonomy* based on my adventures. Lasted three seasons. Even earned an Emmy nomination for best gaffing. I think. I might have imagined the Emmy nomination during a drinking binge.

"Are you a fan? I could get you Daniel Baldwin's autograph. We're tight."

"I already have what I want, Mr. McGlade."

"An overbite?"

"You, Mr. McGlade. I have you."

A scream, from deep inside the house. I couldn't tell if it was male or female.

"Was that Tanya?"

"That came from the Pit. I'm guessing your friend isn't enjoying himself."

"He's not my friend. He's just some idiot who bumped into me when I was breaking into your house. I think he's also mentally retarded. You should let him go—he's too stupid to tell the police."

Another wheel-squeak giggle. This creep needed a squirt of WD-40.

"Let's walk into the next room, Mr. McGlade. Keep your hands where I can see them."

Vlad didn't strike me as a quick guy, and I might have made a try for him if he had a regular gun. But shotguns didn't require much skill. Even if his aim was off, I'd catch some pellets.

Catching pellets sucked.

So I raised my mitts and let him lead me out of the kitchen and into the den. The décor was Goth-chic; black lights, zebra fabric, words like 'blood' and 'death' spray painted on the walls. We walked past two black-clad Pires stoned on the couch. They didn't even glance up at us—the lava lamp was far too engrossing.

"Nice place, Vlad. You rent or own?"

"Own. Balloon mortgage. I'm thinking of refinancing."

"Now's a good time. Rates are low."

From the den we went down a short hall, through a doorway festooned with hanging beads, and came upon...

"What is this? A porno movie?"

"It's an orgy, Mr. McGlade. In your honor."

I stared at the writhing, squirming pile of naked flesh stretching across the floor, most of it female. The participants ranged in age from teens to mid-forties, but everyone I locked my eyes on was pretty, trim, and athletic. Some were also tremendously flexible.

"In my honor?" I glanced at Vlad. He gave me an 'aw shucks' smile, somewhat hampered by his fangs.

"The Pires have followed your exploits, Mr. McGlade. You're a legend. We're honored to have you here at the Den."

One of the undulating naked women glanced in our direction and let out a squeal of delight when her eyes met mine. She disengaged from her partner with an audible *pop* and crawled over to me, locking her hands on my upper thigh.

"Honored, huh?" I said, though in my head I was already composing my letter to Penthouse.

"More than honored. This is indeed a sacred day."

Two more naked women scuttled over, pawing my masculine parts. Though the lighting was low, I could tell by the facial jewelry that one of them was Tanya, the girl I'd come to rescue.

The other was her mother, Josie.

I'd been set up, and good. But why? And did I really care?

"So, you're not going to kill me?"

"Kill you?" Vlad laughed. "Mr. McGlade, we'd be honored if you joined us. But let's not talk of business now. Why don't you spend some time getting to know the warren." Vlad nudged me into the room with the shotgun. "They certainly seem eager to get to know you."

I shrugged. "Well, when in Rome..."

Then I unzipped my pants and waded into the sea of decadence.

If I were a nicer guy, I perhaps might have wondered what was going on with Andrew Mahogany and the Pit.

But I'm not a nicer guy.

- 5 -

Andrew

"Nobody would have to know if you didn't really throw me into the Pit," I explained to the goons as they led me down a gloomy hallway. "Your boss would just say 'Hey, did you throw that guy into the Pit?' and you'd say 'Yep, we sure did,' and he'd say 'Great, thanks,' and you'd say 'No problem.' It's a win-win situation for everybody."

"Shut up," said the goon with the chainsaw.

"I'm just trying to save you some labor. You could go take a smoke break."

We reached the end of the hallway. The goon with the wacky knife pushed past me and opened the door. "Get in there," he said.

It was too dark to see clearly inside the room, but one element was rather obvious. "That's not a pit," I said.

"So what? Get in there."

"Why do you call it the Pit? It's got a regular floor."

"Vlad wanted to call it the Pit, so we call it the Pit."

"But it's not a pit. A pit is concave. That's a room."

"I know it's a room. But what're we gonna call it, the Room? That's not scary."

"How about *The Scary Room*?"

"Shut up."

"Are there, like, peach pits or cherry pits scattered around the floor or something?" I asked.

"If you want to come up with an intimidating name that exaggerates the terror, that's fine, but to call it the Pit when there's no actual pit involved is kind of asinine."

I had a couple of reasons for harping on the whole pit thing apart from trying to show off my rapier wit in the face of danger. First of all, it served as a nice defense mechanism. Otherwise I'd be rolling around on the floor sobbing and begging for mercy, and I didn't want that McGlade prick to find out about it. Second, I was trying to distract the goons while I figured out a way to escape from their clutches before they actually threw me into the Scary Room.

But before I could make the funniest pit-related comment yet (which I've since forgotten) they pushed me into the inappropriately named Pit and slammed the door behind me.

I stood there in the darkness, wondering if I should shout the comment through the closed door. I decided against it.

A few seconds passed. I continued standing there. Really, this wasn't so bad. If nothing else, it was better than rolling around on a corpse. A lot better.

What was that?

I wasn't sure what I'd heard. It sort of sounded like a very quiet giggle.

A very quiet giggle was *not* something I wanted to hear when I was locked in a dark room.

Was I even locked in here?

I turned around and twisted the doorknob. Yep, it was locked. That's what I figured, but I would've felt like quite the dullard if I'd been torn to shreds by the quiet giggler without ever bothering to check the door.

More giggling, not so quiet.

Crap.

I had visions of a little angel-faced girl with golden curls hiding a bloody meat cleaver behind her back.

"Is anybody in here?" I asked, using my "I'm extremely brave" voice.

"Yes," somebody replied. My heart gave such a jolt that for a second I thought it had popped free of its tubing and rolled down next to my stomach.

It was a woman's voice. She sounded like a grandmother.

"I'm here, too," said another elderly-sounding woman, her voice coming from the other side of the room.

Both women giggled.

I heard something that sounded like chains rattling. I stayed put, hoping that my eyes would quickly adjust to the dark. *C'mon, eyes, let's get a move on. Let me see the freaky grandmothers. Let's go. Aw, man, this sucks.*

"Who are you?" I asked.

More giggling. More chains rattling.

"Who are *you*?" asked the woman to my left. She sounded like she was maybe five or six feet away. Not nearly far enough.

"I'm Andrew Mayhem," I said. "I mean you no harm."

The giggling turned into outright laughter. I figured I deserved it. I wiped some sweat off my forehead and continued to stay where I was.

"We mean you lots of harm," said the woman to my right.

"Lots and lots and lots," her companion added.

"I bet your blood tastes *goooooooooooood*."

"Real, real good."

As I looked from side to side, I could now vaguely see the two figures. They seemed to be chained to the wall. I slowly backed up against the door, hoping that their chains were sufficiently short to keep them from tasting my blood.

I knew they weren't vampires. I didn't believe in vampires. I did, however, believe in crazy old ladies with a blood fetish, and I found them rather unnerving.

"Should we bite him?" asked the woman to my left.

"Bite him and drink him all up?"

"Yes, indeedy."

"Mmmmmmmmmmm."

I clenched my fists. "I don't want to have to hurt you," I announced. "But I will. I'll do it."

The women began to slowly walk toward me, chains dragging on the floor behind them. I

was terrified, but at the same time I tried to convince myself that they weren't exactly unbeatable opponents. A halfway decent kick should take care of the problem, right?

"Tasty, salty blood..."

"Warm, sticky blood..."

"So, uh, do either of you ladies know why they call this room the Pit? Seems kind of silly to me, don't you think?"

The old women were now only a couple of feet away. I still couldn't see well enough in the darkness to be sure, but it looked like both of them had really long fingernails, almost claws.

I tried to kick the woman on my left and missed. Not because it was a lame kick, but because the woman moved with unexpected agility.

"Goosey, slimy blood..."

"Spraying, showery blood..."

"Spurty, sticky blood..."

They'd already said "sticky" but I didn't mention it. I threw a punch at the woman on the right that also missed. Both women let out a delighted squeal and pounced at the same time, pulling me to the ground. I felt teeth on my arms, and so help me I screamed like a little girl.

-6-

Harry

The problem with having so many naked women trying to hump me senseless was...

Actually, there was no problem with it at all.

While I can't admit to being in the peak of physical condition (I get winded tying my shoes, which I can't see unless I suck in my gut), I've got a spring-loaded pelvis and can crack walnuts with my butt cheeks. In fact, I've done the walnut thing on a bet before. Watching the guy eat them afterwards was priceless.

That said, I was in good form when the Olympic Copulation began. I'm not quite porn star material, but what I lack in size I make up for in speed.

I figured out early on that not much was required from me in the reciprocation department. Everyone wanted a Bit-O-Harry, and I was happy to oblige. I just laid back, closed my eyes, and

let the ladies take what they wanted.

There was a bad moment, when I felt someone with a mustache kissing me, but it turned out not to be a mustache.

Yes, there was sucking. And groping. And fondling. And pulling. And thrusting. And lots of other *ing* words. And by the time it was finally over, I had to admit that it was indeed the greatest thirty seconds of my life.

"That's enough, baby." I forced back an overzealous Harry fan. "No use trying to prime a dry pump."

I disentangled my legs, pulled my fingers out from wherever they'd been, and shoved away some tattooed vixen writhing on the floor, because she was writhing on my pants.

"Any of you ladies know where the back door is?"

I slapped away an intrusive hand.

"Not that one. The exit."

"Aren't you enjoying yourself, Mr. McGlade?"

It was Vlad. He'd taken off the Hefty Bag ensemble, and stood naked in the doorway. The last time I'd seen anything that small, it was stuck in a *hors d'oeuvre*.

"I'm having a blast, Vladdy old boy. But all good things must end, and frankly, you're all a bunch of psycho freaks. So I'm afraid that—*Jesus!*"

The vixen nearest to me had sunk her bridgework into my ankle, and it hurt like...well...getting bitten on the ankle.

I pulled back, then felt a similar pain on my left hand. And then on my right arm. I kicked away my attackers and limped over to an empty corner of the room to finish pulling up my pants.

"Blood is the elixir of life, Mr. McGlade."

Vlad bared his own fangs, and I noticed Little Vlad waking up to see what all the excitement was about. Even turgid, it was more appropriate for picking locks than satisfying the ladies.

"You've got a real tiny rodney there, Vlad. No wonder you're a power-mad sadist. The shrinkological term is 'overcompensation'."

Vlad squeaked his squeaky squeak-laugh.

"You're to be the ultimate sacrifice, Mr. McGlade. We're going to eat you alive, then deliver your corpse to the president of the network."

"I've met him. He'd prefer tranny hookers."

I zipped up and glanced around the room. Naked, drooling vampires were closing in from all directions. There were at least a dozen. The only door to the room was the one Vlad stood in front of. The wall behind me felt solid, final.

"They didn't listen to our letter writing campaign," Vlad whined. "Or our Internet petition. So maybe your drained, lifeless corpse will show them we aren't fooling around."

I raised an eyebrow.

"What the hell are you talking about, dinky?"

"*Fatal Autonomy*. We want it back on the air."

I had enough bravado left to fake a belly laugh.

"You've got to be kidding! You lured me here, humped me dry, and now want to kill me, all to get my show renewed?"

Vlad got a crazy look in his eye. Well, a *more* crazy look.

"The whole warren loved the show. We watched it every Thursday night." His voice became school-teachery. "What is your favorite TV show, children?"

"*Fatal Autonomy*," they droned in unison.

I pinched myself. I'd had this dream before. Usually, though, there were a few recognizable actresses in the orgy pile. Like the chicks from *Friends*. Or the *Golden Girls*. And no fat naked vampire guy who was hung like a Smurf.

"Look, Vlad, we're all upset when our favorite shows get cancelled. I had to see a therapist for a while after *Xena* ended. But killing me won't..."

"We have a script," Vlad said. I half expected him to pull a sheaf of papers out of his ass and show me. "It's called *Fatal Autonomy*, *The Rise of the Vlad Pires*."

Everyone thinks they're a writer.

"In the script, do you have a bigger Johnson?"

"Get your jokes in now, Mr. McGlade. When your body is found, the media frenzy will ignite a resurgence of interest in your series. The public will demand to know what really happened to Harry McGlade. And next season, they'll find out—in the first half of a two-parter."

"You're crazy. Television doesn't work like that."

Actually, it kinda did. But I didn't want to encourage the fruit loop.

"Children of the night...*ATTACK!*"

Even though they'd sexed me up, I'd had enough of Vlad and the Snuggle Bunch. Two Pires

with lunging fangs got a Moe-style head-crunch, which sounded more like a dull thud than two coconuts hitting. I planted a heel onto the nose of a some nude skinny guy, drilled an elbow into the cheek of a chick who moments ago was making me sing soprano, and then sprinted right at Vlad, stepping on legs and spines and necks, and giving him a swift kick in the peanuts.

Vlad cradled his delicacies like a child holding two raisins and a bran flake, and I pushed past and ran into Crazy Chainsaw Goon, just as he was yanking the cord.

I couldn't hear my screams above the roar of the saw, but I could guess they oozed machismo and self-confidence. I took a quick left through a doorway, another left down a hall, yanked open another door, and flew into a room filled with Vlad and a dozen angry, naked vampires.

I hugged my knees and Crazy Chainsaw Goon toppled over me, falling face first onto his appliance. He must have pinned down his trigger finger, because the saw revved and came up through his shoulder blades like a shark fin, misting me with blood.

I pushed backwards, bare feet sliding in the gore, and scrambled back down the hall with a flock of Pires on my heels.

Which is where I met up with Crazy Knife Goon and his Swiss Army Buffalo Skinner.

He slashed. I ducked. But I didn't duck far enough, and the blade dinged off my scalp. The pain was painful. I fell onto my butt, and he raised the blade for the *coup de grace*.

"Hold on!" I said, showing him my palm.

He paused, holding the striking position. I pressed my free hand to my head.

"Look what you did. You really hurt me, you idiot."

Knife Goon shifted from one foot to the other. "I...uh..."

"Don't just stand there. Get me a bandage or something. Jesus, I'm gonna need stitches."

"Sorry," he mumbled, lowering the knife and turning around.

I planted both my hands on his lower back (okay, it was his ass, but this was special circumstances—I'm 100% all man, baby) and pushed as hard as I could.

He teetered forward, and I scuttled past and made it to my feet, through a door, down a hall, and into the room where Vlad and all the naked vampires were.

Two of them grabbed my legs, sinking their pointy dentures into my knees. Knees are harder than tooth enamel, and I won that encounter, though one incisor wedged itself deep enough into my kneecap to bring macho, manly tears to my eyes.

Another Pire, of the naked male variety, straddled me and put me in a choke hold, which I didn't appreciate because a) I hate being choked and 2) his naked maleness was flapping in my face.

I buried inhibition and played cherry picker, not actually pulling the fruit from the tree but squeezing hard enough to feel pits. I tugged him aside, and then a blast shook the room and two Pires flopped on top of me, victims of Vlad's shotgun.

"Enough of this!" he thundered. "It ends now!"

I pulled the nearest corpse over my head as the shotgun boomed again, her back taking the worst of it, but—son of a bitch—I still caught a few pellets. It sucked.

Pires were screaming now, running this way and that way, and I crawled through the chaos and snuck past Vlad right into Crazy Knife Goon.

Which proved my theory that God did, indeed, want me dead.

The blade came down in a long, sweeping arc. I tried to twist to the side, and it shaved a bacon-sized piece of skin off my biceps.

He raised the knife again, I wondered what hell would be like and if they gave you time off for sucking up, and then his chest became instant Spaghetti-Os to coincide the another shotgun blast from Vlad.

Crazy Knife Goon folded like a lawn chair, his knife falling from his hand and landing, point-first, between my toes, where it stuck in the floor with a *thwak*.

Someone grabbed my ankle, but I had enough adrenaline in my system to kill a mastadon, and I pulled free and sprinted down the hall and tried to remember if I should go left or right so I went right and then another right and then I pulled open the door and there was Vlad with the shotgun.

Apparently this house only had one goddamn room in it.

I ducked. He fired. The drywall lost. When he racked another cartridge in I managed to find another door and even though I fully expected him to be behind this one as well I tugged it open and slammed it shut behind me.

The room was pitch black, and I was breathing like a locomotive, but I swear I heard feminine giggling.

"Ow! Ow! Ow! Ow! Ow! Ow! Hee hee! Ow!" I said, as the ladies clawed and bit into my arms, legs, torso, and an extremely ticklish spot under my right knee.

"Zesty, tangy blood..."

You wouldn't expect chained-up elderly women to be so freakin' strong. For the first few moments I wasn't fighting back as hard as I could, simply because it still felt like I was engaged in combat with my grandma, but once the biting and clawing started to really hurt I punched and kicked with no regard to brittle bones or fragile dentures.

I couldn't get away. I kept straining to get out of chain-range so I could at least cower in a corner, but there was simply no escape from these women. They'd been slurping steroid-laden blood or something.

They were in no hurry to kill me. Though I tried to protect my throat, it was unnecessary—they obviously planned to eat me alive, one tiny bite at a time.

I was definitely bleeding in several different places.

"Foamy, frothy blood..."

Was my blood really foamy and frothy? Or had they just run out of good adjectives?

I couldn't believe that I was going to die from being slowly eaten alive by chained-up elderly ladies who thought they were vampires. I'd always kind of figured that I would go peacefully in my sleep, after my wife dropped an anvil on my head.

One of the ladies bit my arm *hard*. This one actually took some flesh with it. I screamed. (Not that I hadn't been screaming before, but I screamed a little louder at that one.)

They both stopped biting me at the sound of the shotgun.

The three of us listened.

Chaos outside.

Hopefully it was good chaos. Maybe the cops had burst in to save the day. They'd blow away Vlad and his goons, and—*oops, sorry, we bad*—accidentally shoot down McGlade in the crossfire. He'd lay on the floor, blood seeping from the hundred and seventy-eight bullet holes in his chest, wondering why he'd been such a loathsome prick.

I could imagine his eulogy: "Fucker's dead. Throw some dirt on him. Let's go play some poker."

More shotgun blasts. More chaos.

It occurred to me that I should be trying to use the distraction as a tool for escape, rather than fantasizing about Harry McGlade's tragic demise.

I fantasized about it a little bit more, just because it was so pleasant, and then sprung to my feet.

Since my legs were all bitten-up, I promptly dropped back down to the floor. Falling on my legs hurt about as much as getting them bit in the first place.

One of the ladies dove at me. I threw an instinctive punch. It was not a mighty punch, but the momentum of her face moving toward my fist, combined with the momentum of my fist moving toward her face, combined with the fact that I got her right in the middle of the nose, made for one splattery smack. I couldn't quite see the results, but I could feel them on my knuckles.

She let out a howl and began to flail around on the floor. Positive descriptions of my blood's flavor and consistency were replaced by barely coherent, profanity-laden cries of rage and pain.

I couldn't quite tell what the other woman was doing, but I hoped that her partner's wails were keeping her attention. I scurried away from there, yelping as a clawed hand grab my ankle. I slammed my other foot into the hand. The *crack* sounded like it hurt.

I scrambled to the other end of the room, hoping I was out of chain-range. In theory, if the Vlad's administrative assistants had thrown me into the "Pit" with the intention of letting these women devour me, it wouldn't make a hell of a lot of sense for their chains not to give them total access to anywhere in the room.

After pausing to pluck part of a fingernail out of my ankle, I stood up and pressed myself into the corner. Okay, there had to be a way out of this little pickle. If I ran across the room at top speed (ably avoiding the women with my astounding dexterity) and bashed into the door, I'd either break open the door or the left half of my body. Or maybe both, in which case I could at least drag my mangled frame to safety.

I kind of wished that the woman would stop wailing. It was distracting me from figuring out whether the potential mangling was worth it.

The woman stopped wailing.

Much better.

Then she started giggling, which was less noisy but a lot more unnerving. The other woman

giggled with her. I, myself, did not giggle.

I decided that the risk of shattering eighty-three bones was probably worth it.

Another shotgun blast. Much closer than the others.

The door flew open and I got a refreshing glimpse of light as Harry burst into the Pit. He slammed the door behind him, casting us back into darkness.

"Okay, who's doing the giggling?" he asked.

"Harry, I'm in here with you," I said.

"That you, Maypole?"

I was in the mood to be around pretty much any human being in the world but Harry McGlade at this point. "Are you trying to be funny when you screw up my name, or are you just an idiot?"

"Oh, I was talking to some other guy named Maypole. I guess he's not here anymore."

"Idiot."

"Are we in the pit?"

"Yeah."

"Pretty shallow pit."

"I know. How bad are things out there?"

"Oh, things suck out there. Suck bad."

"They suck in here, too."

"Figures. At least we—*crap, something's got my leg!*"

I could hear a struggle, and then a nice loud thump that sounded an awful lot like an incompetent private investigator being pulled to the floor by a chained-up carnivorous old lady.

"Get off me, you toothy bitch!"

I rushed forward to help him. If Harry "Obnoxious Prick" McGlade was going to die, I at least wanted it to be in a room with enough light that I could watch.

The door opened again, and Vlad stepped inside, holding a shotgun. The ladies immediately released Harry and ran to opposite sides of the room, hiding their faces and cowering.

It's easy to be intimidated by a very large man with a shotgun. It's a bit harder when the large man is naked and possesses male equipment that, immature as it may be, can only be described as a wee-wee.

Harry stood up. "You can kill me if you want," he told Vlad, "but then I'll take the secret

combination with me."

Vlad's face went from crazily angry to crazily confused. "What secret combination?"

"If you kill me, you'll never know. I'll take it to my grave. I'll tell you this much, though: The first number is 14. The first digit of the second number is 8, but that's all you're going to get out of me for now. Interested?"

"No."

"What if I told you that diamonds were involved?"

"I'd say that you were a bad liar, and to be perfectly honest I'd be rather offended that you insulted my intelligence in such a manner."

"What if they were big diamonds? The size of honey baked hams?"

I raised my hand as if I were in a classroom. "Can I say something here?"

"Go ahead," said Vlad.

"We're in a residential area, and you've been shooting this place up for the past few minutes. Instead of worrying about us, shouldn't you be fleeing the scene before the cops arrive?"

"Why would I want to do that?"

"Ummmm...you know...getting arrested...going to jail...dropping the soap..."

Vlad laughed. "Don't worry. We have the situation well under control. And now, Harry McGlade, I'm afraid your time has come."

Harry stared at the barrel of the shotgun. "Go ahead and kill me. But I beg you—let Andrew Mormon go. He's innocent."

"No one is innocent."

"You're right. Kill him first."

"Hey!" I started to say, but my protest was drowned out by the much louder cry of "Stop! Don't kill him!"

A girl pushed past Vlad and stepped between the shotgun and Harry. She looked about sixteen, was dressed entirely in black, and had enough metal in her face to be part cyborg.

Harry and Vlad both spoke at the same time: "Tanya...?"

- 8 -

Harry

If life were indeed like a box of chocolates, this evening had been one craptastic bitter orange jelly after another. You know the one—it looks deceptively like a chocolate cream or a truffle, but when you bite into it tastes like someone wiped an orange peel in an ashtray and then loogied on it and encased it in rubber. Those candies suck ass. Why even make those nasty things in the first place? Is anyone even listening to me?

Where was I? Oh yeah. Staring death in the face, again.

I was about to take the shotgun away from Vlad and introduce it into his unhappy place when Tanya exploded into the room and threw herself at me.

"We can't kill him! He's the One!" she yelled. Or something like that. I was still thinking about chocolates.

"He isn't the One!" Vlad hissed.

"He has the Mark!" Tanya screamed.

"The Mark of the One? Where?"

"There! On his arm!"

We all looked at my arm, at a red blotch of psoriasis I'd been meaning to see a doctor about.

"It's the Mark of the One!" Tanya said. "The Pentagram of Ba'al!"

"Looks like psoriasis," said Andrew.

While I'm quick at many things, most of them horizontal, coming up with ingenious schemes on the spot to get myself out of deadly situations isn't one of them. So I surprised myself where I raised up my hands in a grandiose way and bellowed: "*All bow before the One!*"

Everyone in the room bowed, except for my sauce buddy. We locked eyes for an instant, then ran like hell.

Andrew beat me out the door, and he moved like his feet were spring loaded. I huffed and puffed behind him, my own labored breathing drowning out the yells of confusion and chaos all around us. We went left, down a hall, right, down another hall, through the black light room with those two Bill and Ted Pires still stoned on the couch, and wound up right back where we started, facing Vlad and his shotgun.

Andrew back-pedaled, bumping into me, and we took off shoulder-to-shoulder in the direction we came from.

"Who the hell designed this house? M.C. Escher?" he asked.

"Is he still with the Wu Tang Clan?" I asked.

Down another dark hall, left, and right into a Pire with an aluminum baseball bat.

"I'm the One!" I intoned. "Bow before the Mark of Balls!"

He didn't bow. He swung the bat. I tried to duck behind Mayberry, but at the same time he tried to duck behind me, and when our heads hit they actually did make a coconut sound.

The bat buried itself in the drywall, and while the Pire tugged at it, Andrew and I crawled around him and bumped into a door I hadn't seen before. I reached for it, turned the knob, pushed it open, and then Andrew screamed in a most feminine way and pushed me forward.

We fell.

It's disconcerting falling into darkness, and all I had time to do was let out a small yelp and clench my bladder closed before we hit the first stair. After taking three steps to the chin, instinct took over and I reached out for a soft pillow to hug to my chest and break my fall. It worked, and landing was a relatively painless process.

The pillow wasn't amused.

"I think you broke some ribs," he moaned.

I checked. "Nope. I'm fine."

I climbed off Andrew and squinted at the darkness around me. It smelled like a root cellar, earthy and moldy, with an underlying hint of something.

"Now *this*," my airbag said, "*this* is a pit."

"Nice observation, bright boy. Now see if you can find a door to the outside."

"Andrew?"

The voice came from the darkness, somewhere ahead of us. A creepy, crackly, moany kind of voice.

"Andrew who?" I said.

"Andrew Mayhem," it moaned back.

I turned to Andrew. "Know anyone named Mayhem?"

"You're a waste of carbon," Mayhem said. Then to the voice, "Horace? Horace Folterkeller? Is that you?"

"It's me, Andrew!"

"Horace is my neighbor up the street," Andrew said to me.

"Whoop-de-freakin'-doo," I answered.

"I thought you left your wife," he said to Horace.

"I didn't leave her! I was kidnapped and brought here!"

"Oh. You probably don't want to hear about the new man she brought home, then."

"New man? I've only been gone a few weeks."

"Sorry, Horace. Everyone just assumed you ran off."

While this conversation was all savagely interesting to me, I decided that looking for an exit was more important than neighborhood gossip. I groped around blindly, hands in front of me, searching for a door or a wall or something.

"Is he nice?" Horace asked.

"Is who nice?"

"The man my wife is seeing."

"Well...he's got a lot of very nice tattoos."

"Tattoos?"

"And a nice motorcycle."

"She's dating a biker?"

"Well, not dating so much as moved in with."

"What about my teenage daughter?"

"She seems to like him. She's, um, kissing him all the time."

I nudged something with my toe, then crouched down to pick it up. Some sort of slimy hose. I gave it a squeeze.

Nearby, Horace farted.

I squeezed it again.

Another fart.

I put two and two together and realized this wasn't a hose after all. I set it down gently.

"Pardon me," Horace said.

"Buddy, are you, uh, missing anything?"

"Like what?"

"Like your colon?"

Horace sighed. "I thought they were yanking something out of me. I'm chained to the wall so I can't tell."

"Aren't you in any pain?" Andrew asked.

"Nope. Feel pretty good, actually. Got some sort of IV, doping me up. When they come for

feedings it kind of tickles."

An IV? Now that I could use. I had a killer headache, and my arm hurt from landing hard on Mayhem. I was sure Horace wouldn't mind if I gave myself a little poke to take the edge off.

I headed toward him, but my feet got tangled up and I fell sideways, turned a small cartwheel, and ended up on my back with my legs in the air.

There was a loud sound—part flatulence/part slurp—and then Horace produced an exaggerated sigh that sort of petered out into silence.

"Horace? You still there?"

"He's in a better place," I said, unwinding the intestines from my ankles.

"What did you do now, you idiot? How the hell did you ever get a private investigator's license?"

"You need a license?"

"God, I hate you."

I smelled something poopy, and realized that something in the entrail pile was leaking.

"Your neighbor had a lot of guts."

"More than you'll ever have."

"I mean he really had a lot of guts." I felt something small and wet, like a skinned lemon.

"What the hell is this? A spleen?"

"We need to get out of here. Jesus!"

"Call me Harry."

"I found a wall. And another corpse. Oh God, and another one. And another."

I finally kicked off the last of the offal, made it to Horace, and took a hit off his IV tube. Tasted like morphine.

"I think there may be an exit this way. I feel a breeze."

"Mmmm. Morphine."

"Harry, you moron, are you listening to me?"

"Yeah, yeah, breeze, exit, I'll be there in a minute."

"Are you *eating* something?"

"I'm nob eebing ebbyfib."

The morphine went down easy, just like Aunt Emma, and soon all of my various aches and pains were replaced with a non-specific sense of well being. I tied a knot in the tube, pulled the

bag off the IV stand, and then plodded off in the direction of Mayhem's insults.

I found the wall, and my hand touched something wet, sort of like a water balloon coated in baby oil. I squeezed it. It popped. Thank God for total darkness.

"Over here, McGlade. I think I found a door."

I came up next to him and felt around.

"What gave it away?" I asked. "The doorknob?"

"It's locked."

"No shit."

"It feels like one of those bathroom door locks. If we stick something small and thin in the hole, we can open it."

I started to giggle. Some jokes don't even need to be said aloud.

"Feel around for a nail or something."

"I'm on it," I said. Then I sat down and stuck the morphine needle in my mouth.

"Harry? Harry, are you searching for something?"

"Mmmm-hmmm."

Someone, probably Andrew, kicked me. I giggled. Then I felt a pair of hands snatch away my morphine bag.

"Dammit, McGlade, you're getting high!"

"Just taking the edge off. Do you see that bunny?"

I reached out to pat the bunny, and he did a funny little bunny dance.

"Okay, I think I can use this needle."

"Don't bogart it. Save some for your buddy Harry."

I heard a metallic clicking sound, then the sound of a knob turning, then the sound of a door opening, then the sound of two leprechauns having sex.

"Grab her in her Lucky Charms," I said to them.

They laughed, and gave me a big hug. So did the bunny. Then I bit my tongue really hard, just to see if I could feel anything. I couldn't. Life was swell.

"Here's a switch."

A light went on in the room next to me, which scared away the leprechauns. I started to yell at Mayhem to turn the light off, and saw him walking up a flight of stairs. I followed him, because, after all, he had the morphine, and when we got to the top there was another door.

"I think this leads outside," said someone, possibly me, possibly Andy, possibly the large walrus in the clown hat who I had named George.

I loved George.

Andrew opened the door, and standing there were two police officers, and I was 96% sure there weren't a hallucination.

"Thank God," Andrew Mayhem said. "We've been held prisoner in a house full of psychopaths who think they're vampires."

"And there was a bunny," I added.

Then the cop on the left grinned, and I felt very confused because it looked like he had really sharp fangs.

- 9 -

Andrew

Stop.

When Harry and I agreed to relate the unpleasant tale of our unfortunate adventure together, we set some ground rules. First, and most important, was that I would not write in the same room as him. I think we can all agree that this was fair and just. If fewer people spent time in rooms with Harry McGlade, the world would be a much happier place.

Second, we agreed not to debate each other's contributions to the narrative. So though Harry's side of the story has certain...ah, lapses in accuracy, I let them go. He mostly got the big picture right, if not the details.

I was cool with this until I read his last section, where we suddenly have a *completely* fabricated conversation that makes me look like an insensitive idiot. I'm not going to lie to you, I've been an insensitive idiot on many an occasion, but when a guy is chained up in the basement with his intestines slopping out onto the floor, even at my most insensitive and most idiotic I would not try to cheer him up with news that his wife is shacking up with a biker dude.

Correction #1: My neighbor's name was not Horace Folterkeller. It was Dan Smith.

Correction #2: I did not say "You probably don't want to hear about the new man she brought home, then." She did not bring home a new man. Dan's wife was absolutely devastated by the situation.

Correction #3: Dan didn't even have a daughter. He had a son who'd gone off to college.

Correction #4: In fact, not one word of that conversation is accurate. Mostly there was a lot of "Dan! Dan! Can you hear me?" while I gently slapped his face and tried to get him to focus on me. He wasn't even able to speak except for a few incoherent words.

It was all very tragic. That McGlade felt the need to rewrite it into a not-particularly-convincing comedy routine says a lot about his moral character.

What Harry got right was that the bumbling dipshit did indeed take a hit of morphine. You probably thought he made that part up, too, because nobody would actually do something like that, but I assure you that he did. And, yes, you are right to weep over the state of humanity.

So, anyway, we walked up the stairs and saw the cops with fangs. At least Harry saw them. I didn't, because I'm a big stupid poop head and I like to smell people's butts.

* * *

Chad,

After much consideration, and at the urging of my wife, I have come to the decision that I cannot continue writing the story of my encounter with Harry McGlade. As you'll recall, I was initially very reluctant to involve myself in this project for numerous reasons, all of them variations on "Harry McGlade is a cretin."

Your suggestion that we alternate chapters every few pages was a good one. That made the story a collaboration without actually forcing me to "collaborate" with him. And while I certainly had some issues with what he'd written, I figured that they weren't worth fighting over. Readers know what "rings true," and as long as the inaccuracies were kept in Harry's segments, it was fine.

I was even willing to continue the project after he completely made up a conversation just to make me look stupid. I did *not* engage in a cruel dialogue with a dying man about his wife's new lover. It simply didn't happen. But I was willing to forgive even that, provided that I got a chance to include a rebuttal in my own segment.

Now things have gone too far. Harry McGlade has resorted to rewriting *my chapter* to include a painfully juvenile comment about smelling people's butts. Was it funny? Sure, if you're six. Whether McGlade actually intended his "rewrite" to be included in the final product or if he was just trying to annoy me, the simple fact remains that I cannot work with the man.

I would like to return my advance and cancel this project.

Yours truly,
Andrew Mayhem

* * *

Harry,
Just got a troublesome e-mail from Mayhem. Says you're being a dick. Stop it or you don't get paid.

Sincerely,
Chad

* * *

Chaddie,
If Andy likes to smell peoples' butts, I say we should let him. Who are we to judge?
Love,
Harry

* * *

Harry,
Listen, guy, you know I'm your biggest fan, but Andrew is really upset about the whole situation, and he's prepared to walk. Even though we could finish it without him, I can't have him badmouthing the project to the press.

Behave. For me.
Chad

* * *

Chadster,
Oooooooh, is the whiny tattletale going to say mean things about me to Katie Couric? You know, Mayhem isn't so easy to get along with, either. He's so caught up on 'getting the details right' that he's watering down the story. People don't care about the truth, Chad. They want sex and violence and big laughs, like that Ben Stiller movie where he got his nuts caught in his zipper.

Believe me, my heart weeps for that disemboweled Horace Smith guy. But this isn't a police report. This is true crime. It needs to have zing and zip. We owe it to the victims of this tragedy to tell their story in a way that sells the most copies.

I vote we fire Andy's ass and let me collaborate with that chick writer who knew Ted Bundy.

You know, Ann somebody, the one who does all those books, wrote The Stranger Who Boffed Me or whatever it was called. The movie had Mark Harmon in it. Google her.

Love & Spankies,

Harry

* * *

Andrew "Narc" Mayhem,

TATTLETALE!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

Harry

* * *

Harry,

Andrew forwarded me the e-mail you just sent to him. I'm being totally serious now: I *will* cancel this project if you two can't learn to work together, and you *will* be responsible for paying back the advance, as per your contract.

Do you want to remain a second fiddle to Jacqueline Daniels all your life?

Finish up the story. Stop acting like a jackass.

Yours truly,

Chad

* * *

Chadmeister—

Maybe you forgot who dropped this sweet project right into your lap. You think I didn't have publishers calling me up and begging for the exclusive rights? Sure, you offered fat bank, but you also promised that I could tell my story, my way.

Now you're suddenly all buddy-buddy with the butt sniffer, threatening to take back money that you know I already spent on massage therapy.

You want to play hardball? Fine. How do you think your bosses will feel when they hear you've screwed up this deal? Think you'll get a big promotion? Or think you'll be back in the mailroom, stuffing Xeroxed rejection letters into slush pile SASEs?

Look, I'm a reasonable guy. If you call me up in the next twenty minutes and beg my forgiveness, I'll try my best to play nice with Mayhem.

But you also have to call up Bunny Muffin's Personal Massage Assistants on Halsted, and tell them to send Candi over, on your dime. You've made me all tense.

And make sure it's Candi with an "i". They have a Candy with a "y" there, and I'm not into that weirdo enema stuff.

Kisses,

Harry

P.S.: On second thought, send them both.

* * *

Andrew,

Harry and I had a nice long phone conversation after I e-mailed him the ultimatum. I realize that he's not the easiest person to get along with, but he does understand that keeping his advance money is contingent upon both of you submitting a publishable final product. So you shouldn't have any more problems. Keep me in the loop.

Yours truly,

Chad

* * *

"Wow, those are some sharp-ass teeth!" said Harry, pointing at one of the cops.

The cops smiled. One of them pressed the button on the side of his walkie-talkie. "Just a party that got a bit loud," he said. "We're breaking it up right now." He replaced the walkie-talkie on his belt.

"So...uh, when you say 'breaking it up,' does that mean you're going to arrest the bad guys, or am I pretty much screwed?" I asked.

"The second one," said the cop.

"That's what I figured. The fangs sort of clued me in."

"I like hamburgers," Harry said.

The cops looked at each other, then at me. "What's his problem?"

"He's drugged up. And stupid. Just ignore him, unless you're looking for somebody to kill first."

The cops grinned. "Ignore the inspiration for *Fatal Autonomy*? Not likely. You, on the other hand, are going into the Pit."

I did not weep at this.

But I wanted to.

"Keeeyaaaa!"

I struck the first cop with the knife-edge of my left hand, Drunken Jeet Kun Shaolin Monkey Fu style. I connected with the bridge of his nose, and he made like a bad poker hand and folded.

Cop Number two pulled his weapon, but my instincts were honed like something really well-honed, and I grabbed his wrist and shoved the gun upward.

Mayhem was bending down near the second cop's butt, but I am close to 100% positive he wasn't sniffing anything. Following my heroic lead, Mayhem drove his shoulder into the second cop's stomach, driving him backwards.

The gun went off, the bullet zinging over my head. Then Andrew made a fist and hit the cop in the jaw, and it was like watching a gigantic macho volcano unleashing its manly fury, all muscles and testosterone and heroics.

Mayhem threw a series of powerhouse Clubber Lang lefts and rights, growling like a heroic grizzly bear as he pummeled the Pire. Not once did Andrew whimper like a whiney little tattletale bitch boy, no matter what anyone says.

The cop went down, and Mayhem pried the gun from his hand and pointed it at me. I wondered if, in the frenzy of the moment, my heroic good friend had somehow forgotten who the bad guys were. I grabbed Pepe the Dancing Leprechaun and ducked.

But Andrew had retained a clear head, and he fired at the first cop, who had gotten up behind me and was now holding one of those Conan swords, the really thick ones with the blood groove and the handle made from the tail of a dragon, but not a real dragon because they aren't real, one of those plastic dragons with reinforced graphite fibers.

Then, somehow, the whole house burst into flames.

"Could this be supernatural vampire magic?" I thought, searching for the dropped morphine bag.

The screams of the damned echoed from the house. Or maybe it was the screams of all those poor fuckers who were on fire.

They must have had some sort of meth lab in there, or maybe an oil refinery, because then there was this gimungous explosion, which blew Mayhem and I at least ten yards across the

lawn.

Sadly, Pepe didn't make it.

Mayhem and I slowly got to our feet, picking off the burning pieces of his poor victim neighbor Dan Foltersmith, and parts of some naked elderly old women, and a heavily pierced ear that forensics later identified as belonging to Tanya Mertz, the runaway who began this whole sordid mess.

Little Tanya had finally come home. In a very small box.

Case closed.

Paramedics came, with methadone to help me overcome my new addiction. And fire fighters. And news crews. And real cops without fangs who took our statements and offered me a key to the city because, in their words, "We always kinda knew there was something wrong with this house."

Andrew Mayhem mumbled something about having to get home, so we shared a manly handshake.

"You done good, kid," I told him. "I want you to have this."

I reached into my pocket, and handed him a jar of spaghetti sauce. No mushrooms.

"Thanks, Harry. We sure had some adventure, didn't we?"

"We sure did, Andrew. We sure as hell did."

We embraced, and then he walked stoically away, into legend.

You can see the whole thing next summer, in the new Fatal Autonomy movie, *Bloodsucker Nightmare: Harry McGlade vs. The Vampires*, directed by Uwe Boll, coming direct to DVD. It will have exclusive uncut bonus footage, including eight minutes of commentary by me, and the alternate "pants-wetting ending" which Andrew assures me was just spilled water.

They never found Vlad. And I'm man enough to admit that his undersized wee-wee sometimes haunts my dreams. Was he really a nosferatu, an undead immortal ghoul who will forever walk the earth, feasting on the living? Or was he just a fat guy with a small Johnson?

Just to be safe, keep your doors and windows locked at night, and always carry a clove of garlic in your pants.

And if you're alone in your room, at night, alone, reading this tale of horror, and you hear something moving around in your bedroom closet...

RUN LIKE HELL! IT'S VLAD! HE'S GOING TO KILL YOU! GET OUT OF THE HOUSE!

—Harrison Harold McGlade, Chicago IL.

- 11 -

Andrew

Harry McGlade has a nicer car and legions of deluded fans, but I have one thing that he doesn't: the final word.

Since he was whacked out on morphine at the time, I'm going to excuse the fact that his final contribution to this tale of misery and woe was 97.3% inaccurate. But you already knew that.

Let's back up to the fanged cops. I'm not in the habit of attacking officers of the law, even when they're clearly part of the nefarious scheme. However, Harry let out a cry of "Turnip power!" and threw a punch, leaving me no choice but to fight or get shot.

I will say this for Harry, he did get in one doozy of a punch. I think it even broke the cop's jaw. The other cop, however, got in a good punch of his own, knocking McGlade against the wall. He slid to the floor.

"I think I just wet somebody else's pants," he said.

I took out the other cop. That part Harry got right. But my victory glow only lasted slightly longer than Harry McGlade's average sexual encounter, because I immediately spun around to find myself once again staring at Vlad and his goddamn shotgun. Tanya stood next to him.

"If you say I'm going in The Pit again, I swear I'm gonna lose it," I said.

Vlad shook his head. "No Pit for you this time."

"Quick shotgun death?"

Vlad nodded.

"Shit."

"I just grew a toe on my hand," said Harry, holding his hand in front of his face. "I'm not sure if it's a third or fourth toe. They both look a lot alike."

Vlad stared at him.

"It's winking at me with its toenail. Does anybody else think that's strange? 'Cause I don't. I'm naming him Toejam McSmelly. He's an Aries."

"I'm not so sure he's The One anymore," said Tanya.

"Wooooooooooooooooo," said Harry. "That's a funny word. Wooooooooooooooooo. It sounds funny

when I say it. One time I ate a whole bag of sunflower seeds without chewing, and they came out looking exactly the same. That was a pretty wild night. Woooooooooooo."

Vlad pointed the shotgun at Harry and prodded him with the barrel. "What the hell is your problem?"

"I can fit my whole fist in my mouth. See?"

Harry crammed four fingers into his mouth, bit down on them, and began to scream in his throat.

"They gave *this* guy his own TV show?" Tanya asked.

Vlad looked crestfallen. "There must have been a huge amount of creative license. The Harry McGlade I'm looking at...hell, he didn't even perform well at the orgy in his honor. Screw *Fatal Autonomy*."

"That's right, screw *Fatal Autonomy*," Tanya said.

"Screw *Fatal Autonomy* to hell and back!" I said.

"Screw *Fatal Autonomy*," said a bunch of voices that I hadn't even realized were within earshot.

Harry pulled his hand out of his mouth and made some smacking sounds.

"I can taste my own tongue," he said.

"I'm just going to put him out of his misery," said Vlad, pressing the shotgun against Harry's forehead.

"No, no! Don't make him a martyr!" I said. "Just leave him there to wallow in his lameness. Me too. Don't make me a martyr, either."

"You're right." He popped out his fangs and tossed them onto the floor. "Harry McGlade is not worthy to battle the Pires. Come, flock! We must depart before the real police arrive. There will be no sacrifice this day. We will seek...Daniel Baldwin! Away with us!"

Vlad and the Pires filed out of the house, got into a minivan, and drove away.

"Well," I said.

Harry smiled. "Woooooooooooooooooooo."

So, the house did not burn down. There was no explosion. The Pires did not all perish, though a few days later the Beverly Hills police force caught most of them. Harry did not magically pull out a jar of spaghetti sauce. My version of the events is not as dramatic, I'll admit, but that's the way it happened.

Harry McGlade's stupidity saved his life.

And mine.

For that, I will be forever in his debt.

I spent the rest of the evening being questioned by the police. And so ended my adventure.

- The End -

* * *

Andrew,

Just finished reading the manuscript. Did I really say all that shit? Wow. That was some good morphine. I'll have to get the recipe.

I know that Chad said to let you finish it up and not make any suggestions, but c'mon, what fun is it to end the story with you being questioned by the police? Look, we faced death together, and all I'm asking is that you forget about logic for a few paragraphs and give this thing a snappy ending. Maybe some Nazi's bust in, and we kick their asses, and then get drunk. Make them girl Nazis, with big cans. Or we could just go with what I originally wrote. Uwe Boll said it was brilliant.

At the very least, let's exchange some sort of macho camaraderie *Lethal Weapon* banter. Maybe you're so grateful I saved your life that you hug me.

It might also be funny if your fly was open, and you zipped up real fast and got your nuts caught in your zipper. I know that didn't happen, but *man*, that would be sweet!

Think it over.

Your pal,

Harry

* * *

Harry and I walked away from the burning house, our faces lit by the eerie glow.

"You're a good man, Mayhem," he said.

"You're a..." I winced as the word tried desperately to avoid coming out of my mouth, "...good man, too, McGlade."

"Best of luck in the future."

"You too."

We shook hands. We did not hug.

I returned home. Weary, yes. In pain, definitely. But I knew that somehow, in some demented, messed-up way, my encounter with Harry McGlade had made me a better person, and I would never forget the time we'd spent together. All things considered, it was a pretty good evening.

Except that I forgot about the fucking spaghetti sauce.

INTERVIEW

Jeff Strand interviews Joe Konrath

Strand says: Calling Jack Kilborn an exciting new voice in horror is sort of a cheat, since it's the pen name for J.A. Konrath, which is the "I could totally be a chick if you want to buy a book by a chick" pen name for Joe Konrath. But Jack Kilborn is the dark, dark, dark side of Joe Konrath, and his first novel *Afraid* is one of the most relentless horror novels in...well, maybe ever. If you're a fan of authors like Richard Laymon, then *Afraid* will have you wetting yourself and the people around you with glee. He's usually known for incorporating lots of humor into his books, but *Afraid* plays it straight.

Therefore, I conducted a serious interview with him. Then Joe suddenly was all like "D'oh! We should've done a funny interview!" and I was all like "I did it this way on purpose to better match the tone of Jack Kilborn" and he was all like "No! No! No! This is wrong! Can we do another interview?" and I was all like "Do you think I have nothing better to do than keep interviewing you over and over? Get a friend, for God's sake!" and he was all like "I'll give you a [favor omitted]" and I was all like "Sure." So here's an interview with JA/Joe/Jack, who, for the convenience of this interview, will go by "Jack"...

Jeff: You once signed books at over 600 bookstores in a single summer. I think that a truly successful author could've just signed at the same store 600 times and made the readers come to him. Please comment.

Jack: My new novel, *Afraid*, is being released on March 31, 2009. Run out and buy it. In fact, everyone reading this, and everyone they know, and everyone then don't know, needs to buy a copy. Oh, and that's an excellent point you've brought up, that I'm going to ignore.

Jeff: Uh, okay then. We're 0 for 1 so far. How about you ask me a question, even though the whole point of this was to promote Jack Kilborn's upcoming novel *Afraid*?

Jack: Okay, when we wrote our collaborative novella, *Suckers*, did you have as much fun working with me as I did working with me?

Jeff: I had so much fun writing the good parts of *Suckers* that I had to be put on anti-giddy medication. But I've heard the occasional comment that the humor in *Suckers* may not reach a 100% maximum maturity level, and that perhaps it's an entire novella of "Hee hee hee! Men have wieners!" What happened to our original plan to write an insightful deconstruction of the current political climate?

Jack: Heh heh heh. You said "weiners." Heh heh.

Jeff: You spelled "wieners" wrong, dumb-ass.

Jack: I've always wanted to ask you this: Have you ever gotten so wasted you wet the bed and then tried to convince your wife that the dog must have peed on you while you were sleeping, which was the first thing that you could think of when she caught you trying to flip the mattress over? Next time, you should wait until she gets out of bed before you try to flip the mattress. Also, Lysol gets out lingering odors pretty good.

Jeff: Since when does Lysol have a capital S in it? I tried that once, and my wife pointed out that we don't own a dog. I retroactively blamed the cat, but it was unsuccessful, and then I felt guilty about incorporating an innocent cat into my web of deceit. Now we just have rubber sheets.

Jack: I see. Very intereSting.

Jeff: Next question: When I let you borrow my car to transport that dead hooker across state lines, you promised me that it would never happen again. It happened twelve more times. I'm starting to think that you *aren't* succumbing to the uncontrollable urge to kill, kill, kill and are instead just using my car to return DVDs to Blockbuster so you don't have to pay for gas. Is that true? Is it?

Jack: I swear, it was all about murder. It's always been about murder. But on your way to work, can you return these copies of *Gigli* and *Ernest Goes to Jail* for me? Can you do that, Vern? And see if they have the next Ernest film, *Ernest Gets Waterboarded*. I heard it has comic hijinks.

Jeff: Jim Varney is dead, and I'll thank you not to mock his memory. He was the dog in *Toy Story*, you son of a bitch!

Jack: But getting back to talking about *Afraid*, which comes out March 31. *Afraid* is a very scary book, with a very real end of March publication date. What scares Jeff Strand? I mean, other than those Publishers Weekly reviews you got? I didn't even know that "sucktastic" was a word, but it must be, because they used it like eight times.

Jeff: You're taking that out of context. The review says "In a world of sucktastic books like those sucktastic books written by the sucktastic J.A. Konrath, whose sucktastic *Whiskey Sour*, sucktastic *Bloody Mary*, sucktastic *Rusty Nail*, sucktastic *Dirty Martini*, and sucktastic *Fuzzy Navel* are pure suck, it's refreshing to see the awesomeness of Jeff Strand."

Jack: That sucks.

Jeff: *Shot of Tequila* is an insanely entertaining book, and yet you're practically giving it away on your website. Why don't you charge more? I'd pay at least seven bucks to read it, if you hadn't given it to me for free. Do you think the people who you're charging a dollar will be mad when they see this interview and find out that you let me read it for free? What's *Shot of Tequila* about, anyway? I wasn't paying much attention because it was free.

Jack: Selling *Shot of Tequila* on my website for 99 cents was an experiment. It's an early Jack Daniels novel, except Jack is a supporting character. I wanted to see how many people would be willing to pay for an Ebook download. So far, 112. I also have free Ebooks available on my website. They've been downloaded—no joke—15,834 times. Which proves my hypothesis that my fans are cheap. That's why *Afraid*, which comes out March 31, is available as an inexpensive paperback for only \$6.99. On March 31.

My turn for a question. In ten short years, your fan base has grown from a dozen hardcore fans to almost double that. That isn't actually the question. The question is, if you were Night Owl II from *Watchmen*, and you had that pimped out flying submarine thingy, would you act so broody and dippy all the time?

Jeff: Probably. But I can say that if I were a guest in the submarine thingy, and it was parked in the garage, and there was a button with a very clear picture of a flame on it, I wouldn't push the button while the submarine was indoors. So if J.A. Konrath and Jack Kilborn got into a fight, who would drop to the ground screaming "Don't hit me! Don't hit me!" first?

Jack: We wouldn't fight. We'd make-out. That's not gay. It's more like masturbation, with more positions. Hey, you write funny horror novels. I've got this great idea for a funny horror novel, about an accountant who gets bitten by a werewolf AND a vampire AND a zombie, and then gets cancer. I mean, how unlucky is THAT?!?! I want to call it "Sheldon the Un-Un-Undead Dead Guy, Who Died." It's also got paranormal romance in it, because that genre still has a pulse. Maybe Sheldon also gets bitten by a mummy. Do you turn into a mummy if a mummy bites you? Anyway, I'm too busy to write it, so I want you to write it, and I'll give you 20% of the profits. You need to research that mummy thing first. Here's an outline you can work from:

Chapter 1 - The accountant gets bitten a bunch of times by monsters. Also, he's got a hot next door neighbor who sunbathes naked.

Chapter 2 - Some plot things happen.

Chapter 3 - At long last, the much-awaited graphic sex scene with the hot naked next door neighbor. Also, maybe the hero does some monster stuff.

Chapter 4-29 - More stuff happens. With twists. Remember to add some surprise twists.

Chapter 30 - The hero dies of cancer, while having hot sex with the hot naked next door neighbor. Also, there's a surprise ending. Maybe with a mummy. With this outline, the book will practically write itself. In fact, I'm only giving you 10%, since I did all the work.

Jeff: Does he have to be named Sheldon?

Jack: Never mind. Much like Ernest, I'm known for my comedic hijinks, as are you. But now we've both written these super-scary horror novels without a shred of comedy in them. So my question to you is, Angelina Jolie or Jessica Alba?

Jeff: What about them? I'm not sure what you're asking. Are you asking which one I've spoken to most recently? That would be Jess. I didn't give her your message, though, because it was kind of creepy. I just did the panting and left it at that. Angelina is busy these days and we mostly talk through Skype.

Jack: I like to ask the tough questions. So, if John's son is my son's father, what relationship am I to John?

Jeff: You're John's prison bitch. Duh.

Jack: Can you do anything unusual or interesting? I can fit my pinky up my nose all the way to the second knuckle, but I'm scared to go further because I'm touching something squishy that I think is my brain.

Jeff: That's not your brain. And it's not your nose.

Jack: If you were stuck on a desert island and could only have one book, wouldn't that suck?

Jeff: It would. Unless that book was *Afraid*, by Jack Kiborn. It comes out March 31, you know.

Jack: Really? March 31? I should write that down. Being serious for a moment, I loved your novel *Pressure*, which is possibly the most intense horror novel I've ever read. It really gets under your skin, and shows no mercy. Do you find it bizarre that this book, which is getting the most publicity and the biggest print run of all of your books, is so unlike your other work?

Jeff: See, I introduced this interview by saying that *Afraid* was one of the most relentless horror novels I've ever read, so now it just looks like we're giving each other full-contact body rubs. One of us has to withdraw our praise. I guess it'll be me. I don't find it bizarre—I worried that my current fans would be disappointed by the decreased humor level (they weren't) but even while writing it, it was clearly my most mainstream book.

Jack: I just read *Benjamin's Parasite*, which has all the elements of essential Strand: a luckless hero in over his head, over-the-top gore, outrageous action scenes, funny as hell dialog, and richly developed characters, all of them memorable, the majority of whom don't survive. You

manage to make this hodge-podge of seemingly disparate elements work, and work well. I cared about the protagonist, the book is fast based, scary, and laugh out loud hilarious, and the plot actually makes sense—it isn't just a strung together collection of comedy sketches.

Jeff: Thanks! That's not a question though, so now we have to sit here in an uncomfortable silence.

Jack: ...

Jeff: ...

Jack: ...

Jeff: I have great questions for you and great answers from you regarding *Afraid* and Jack Kilborn's second novel, *Trapped*, but they'll have to wait for the "serious" interview, which I think I'll send to FearZone, because FearZone is way cool and has brought readers advance news on *Benjamin's Parasite*. Wouldn't it suck for you if FearZone rejected it? That would be awkward. I'd probably make up some excuse to spare your feelings, like maybe the webmaster died or something. Well, I guess we've babbled enough...so what's that book again?

Jack: *Afraid*.

Jeff: Available on...?

Jack: March 31st.

Jeff: Available in...?

Jack: Your local bookstore, or fine online retailers.

Jeff: Do you have a website that people should visit for all the latest J.A. Konrath/Jack Kilborn news, blog entries that could serve as full Writer's Digest articles, and more cool stuff than you can wave a monkey at?

Jack: Yes. It's—

Jeff: –and we’re out of time for this interview. I’d like to thank Jack Kilborn for taking the time to hang out on my blog, and encourage everybody to support their local bookstore the day before April Fool’s Day by purchasing a copy of *Afraid* to call their very own.

Read the Jack Daniels series by JA Konrath:

Whiskey Sour
Bloody Mary
Rusty Nail
Dirty Martini
Fuzzy Navel
Cherry Bomb

Exclusive ebooks by JA Konrath:

55 Proof
Origin
The List
Disturb
Shot of Tequila
Suckers by JA Konrath and Jeff Strand
Planter's Punch by JA Konrath and Tom Schreck
SERIAL by Blake Crouch and Jack Kilborn
Floater by JA Konrath and Henry Perez

And read **Afraid** by Jack Kilborn, who is actually JA Konrath

<http://www.JAKonrath.com>

Read the Andrew Mayhem series by Jeff Strand:

**Graverobbers Wanted (No Experience Necessary)
Single White Psychopath Seeks Same
Casket For Sale (Only Used Once)**

Other books by Jeff Strand:

**Pressure
Benjamin's Parasite
The Sinister Mr. Corpse
Gleefully Macabre Tales
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The Haunted Forest Tour (with James A. Moore)
The Severed Nose
Disposal
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Elrod McBugle on the Loose**

<http://www.JeffStrand.com>